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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Death and Decay:  
The Religious, Aesthetic, and Philosophical Underpinnings  
of Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Spanish

by

Jared Spencer White

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Gonzalo Navajas, Chair  
Professor Juan Villegas  
Assistant Professor Santiago Morales-Rivera

2015



## DEDICATION

To

Max, Sean, and Dylan, my three boisterous and beloved boys, so full of life and love;

Emily, my patient, beautiful, and inspirational wife,

for always seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, even when I couldn't;

friends, mentors, and colleagues, too numerous to count.

I couldn't have done this without you.

“Le miroir brisé,  
il ne reste rien  
qui puisse nous servir pour répondre  
aux questions du siècle.”

Albert Camus *L'Homme révolté*

“The contemporary theatre is an eruption,  
a vile sickness of the cities.  
We need to expel that sickness,  
sweep it away with a broom.”

Anton Chekhov, “Letter to I.L. Leontiev-Shcheglov”  
dated November 7, 1888

“¡Es pesada como una tesis doctoral!”

El Bravo, puppet *primer galán* in Valle-Inclán's  
*La cabeza del dragón*, while hoisting the titular *cabeza*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express deep appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Gonzalo Navajas, who has provided me with ample room to explore, grow, and develop as a scholar. A project that began with its roots firmly planted in Spain's illustrious *Siglo de Oro* has found a home in its dynamic *Generación del '98*. Without Professor Navajas's extensive help and excellent advice, I could have never made that journey. *Mil gracias*.

I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Juan Villegas and Assistant Professor Santiago Morales-Rivera, whose generous encouragement, support, and conversations helped move this project along. I cannot thank Professor Villegas enough for the opportunity he offered me to work alongside him with *Gestos* and am indebted to Professor Morales-Rivera for his encouragement and careful guidance.

In addition, a heartfelt thank you to Professors Dale Pratt and Valerie Hegstrom, two of my most beloved mentors and friends, is in order. It seems like just yesterday I was at BYU, wondering if I could possibly dedicate my career and livelihood to Spanish theater. Thanks, Valerie, for helping me make the right choice. And thank you, Dale, for an inspiring Spanish 339 class oh-so-many years ago. It was the beginning of a friendship I still hold very dear.

Growing up in San Juan Capistrano, the decision to come to UCI was not a difficult one. My parents and siblings have been instrumental in ensuring my own family's happiness and mental well-being. Thanks, Dad, for your powerful example of tireless determination and hard work. Mom, thank you for seeing so much in me—I hope to never let you down. Thanks, Jessica, you've saved Emily and me in so many ways: a voice of reason in trying times, an extra buddy for a spur-of-the-moment trip to the zoo, a doting aunt for three very rambunctious boys. Meri, thanks for your last-minute haircuts and bubbling energy. Thank you, Chase, for putting up with me all these years. You've become someone I admire.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to my friends who have buoyed me up as I struggled to write this dissertation. Jesús Miguel-Saldaña—un abrazote fraternal por tu gran ejemplo y constante ánimo. Nos reuniremos en el camino ya pronto; Benjamin Cluff—we've been through so much together, thanks for listening and sympathizing. You've been a true friend. To my colleagues in the Spanish and Portuguese department, thank you for your support and counsel over the years.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

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## PLAY REVIEWS

"Review of *Casa con dos puertas mala es de guardar*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 62.2 (2010): 157-59.

"Review of *Jazz Club Polonia*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 63.2 (2011): 160-62.

"Review of *El coloquio de los perros*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 67 (2015) (forthcoming)

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Death and Decay:  
The Religious, Aesthetic, and Philosophical Underpinnings  
of Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*

By

Jared S. White

Doctor of Philosophy in Spanish

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Gonzalo Navajas, Chair

This dissertation investigates the rationale behind Ramón del Valle-Inclán's culminating theatrical technique, his morbidly dark, culturally caustic, and societally damning *esperpento*. I am specifically interested in the religious, historical, cultural, artistic, philosophical, and theatrical factors that contributed to its development. From modernist beginnings (exemplified by several of his short stories and *Las sonatas*), he artistically travels through a post-feudal period in Spanish history when its final vestiges of nobility sink into disrepair; the supposedly noble values associated with this caste, like its bearers, have been abandoned. All that remains, as Max Estrella somberly concludes in the twelfth scene of *Luces de Bohemia*, “es una deformación grotesca de la civilización europea” (OC II 933).

As a whole, I will consider Valle-Inclán's novels, plays, and poetry in order to recognize a latent, albeit ever-present, current of decadence and degeneration in his works. I propose that primary manifestations of the same characteristics that critics have come to integrally associate with his *esperpentos*—brazen anticlericalism, aesthetic deterioration, apathetic immorality—appear throughout his works as a whole. Such an assertion implies that Valle's dramatic theory

of the *esperpento* represents the accumulation and adaptation of the theme of decay, absence, and estrangement in a diverse array of textual forms, ranging from poetry and drama, novel and short story. Like Valle's own gradual disillusionment with his nation, his people, and his politics, the *esperpentos* are forged by an agonizingly decadent society whose depiction—partial images of corruption that can be found throughout the full spectrum of Valle's literary and dramatic productions—only fully materializes in the *esperpentos* themselves.

## Introduction: Decadent Quixotism

The ideal conceptions of a past epoch, and of a class which has lost its functions, in conflict with the reality of the contemporary present ought to have led to a critical and problematic portrayal of the latter, the more so since the mad Don Quixote is often superior to his normal opponents by virtue of his moral steadfastness and wit.

- Auerbach, *Mimesis* 333

He asistido al cambio de una sociedad de castas (los hidalgos que conocí de rapaz), y lo que yo vi no lo verá nadie. Soy el historiador de un mundo que acabó conmigo. Ya nadie volverá a ver vinculeros y mayorazgos. Y en este mundo que yo presento de clérigos, mendigos, escribanos, putas y alcahuetes, lo mejor—con todos sus vicios—eran los hidalgos, lo desaparecido.

- Valle-Inclán “La comedia bárbara de Valle-Inclán” (*Entrevistas* 258)

### I. A Hopeless Quijote

Eric Auerbach’s assertion that don Quijote finds himself trapped in a time and place far distant from the chivalric world he finds so endearing closely parallels Ramón del Valle Inclán’s obsession with Spain’s noble past and its evanescence in his present. Whereas don Quijote resolutely longs to restore the glory of a long-gone world of knights and damsels-in-distress, Valle recognizes that the age of *hidalgos* has reached its limit—no longer viable at the turn of the twentieth century, his stories imbue historical vitality into a now defunct social and political order. On one hand, don Quijote boldly explains to Sancho that “yo nací por querer del cielo en esta nuestra edad de hierro para resucitar en ella la de oro” (175). On the other hand, Juan Manuel de Montenegro, one of the final *hidalgos* to appear in Valle’s *oeuvre*, dejectedly ruminates that “nuestra raza degenera [. . . ] Ya no hay hombres como nosotros, capaces de morir por una idea. Hoy los enemigos, en vez de odiarse, se dan la mano sonriendo” (OC II 386). As the “último superviviente de una gran raza,” Montenegro’s final mission, as he comes to realize, is to ease the transition from feudalism into democracy by ensuring that aristocratic values—the exemplary virtues of leadership, courage, and conviction—somehow manage to find

a place in the rising nobility (OC II 130). Beset by the challenges of a dominant mass mentality and a careless aristocracy, the social and political realities of present Spain frustrate Montenegro's heroic efforts and, in a dramatic confrontation between the last *hidalgo* and his wayward sons, cost him his life.

It is far too simple a task to disconnect don Quijote from Valle-Inclán by arguing that the former romantically strives to revitalize the world of the chivalric romance whereas the latter more realistically wishes to record the passing of an era he holds in equal esteem. Both figures clearly admire the previous generations; even if don Quijote's inspiration draws from a largely fictional source, his ambition, to save his fallen reality by chivalrously responding to its shortcomings, follows the same nostalgic model as Valle's earnest efforts to literarily and theatrically represent the era of *hidalguismo*—an age, I would not hesitate to add, that Valle liberally imbues with incredible accounts. Eric Auerbach diagnoses don Quijote's obsession with the chivalric past as a type of symptom of his madness, a generative illusion that consistently causes him to feel lost in his own societal and temporal station.

By his detailed description of the circumstances of his hero's life, Cervantes makes it perfectly clear, at the very beginning of his book, where the root of Don Quixote's confusion lies: he is the victim of a social order in which he belongs to a class that has no function. He belongs to this class; he cannot emancipate himself from it; but as a mere member of it, without wealth and without high connections, he has no role and no mission. He feels his life running meaninglessly out, as though he were paralyzed. Only upon such a man, whose life is hardly better than a peasant's but who is educated and who is neither able nor permitted to labor as a peasant does, could romances of chivalry have such an

unbalancing effect. His setting forth is a flight from a situation which is unbearable and which he has borne for far too long. He wants to enforce his claim to the function proper to the class to which he belongs. (137)

Like don Quijote, Ramón del Valle-Inclán identifies with a society whose vitality has already run its course. While don Quijote battles imaginary giants and illusory armies, Valle more broadly recounts the military exploits (and defeats) of the Carlist troops in his *Guerra carlista* trilogy; even as don Quijote praises Marcela for her exquisite pastoral beauty, Valle idealizes La niña Chole, an exotic indigenous woman found in *Sonata de estío*; whereas don Quijote takes the responsibility to redeem society upon himself, Valle suggests that societal reformation requires total deformation. In other words, the redeeming qualities that don Quijote recognizes in his society are absent in Valle's pitiless vision and, rather than quixotically hope to rejuvenate his fallen surroundings, he adamantly seeks to destroy them.<sup>1</sup>

From 1920 until the end of his life, Valle's artistic style, especially prevalent in his theatrical works, darkly imagines Spain as a corrupt, decadent, and vulgar society. In these plays, which he designates as *esperpentos*, he ridicules long-held traditions such as Spain's famous code of honor, popularized by Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina, and Lope de Vega, among others; he vilifies representatives of the Church, ranging from a married priest to a promiscuous Christ-figure; and he harshly criticizes modern Spain's aesthetic insensitivity, causing an impoverished artist to ultimately forfeit his life. Death and decay, prominent themes found throughout the *esperpentos*, sharply clash with some of Valle's earlier literary tropes, which José

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<sup>1</sup> José Rubia Barcia is careful not to take Valle-Inclán's evident quixotic connection too far. Acknowledging Valle's destructive method, he states: "Vale, sin embargo, distinguir claramente y no tenerle por quijotesco, en cuanto don Quijote puede significar exceso. El sentido de la justicia en Valle-Inclán empieza por ser social, que es lo de la hora, y si se queda donde empieza es porque el afán destructivo de lo existente acapara y abarca la totalidad de sus energías, perdiendo en sentido nacional lo que alcanzan en universalidad" (241).

Ortega y Gasset derisively describes in 1904 as “princesas rubias que hilan en ruecas de cristal, [. . .] ladrones gloriosos [e] incestos” (“Sentido” 56). Partaking of the same *modernismo* current celebrated by Ruben Darío and that was in vogue in Europe at the turn of the century, Valle’s early works, particularly the 1902-1905 *Sonatas*, portray some of the very figures—swooning lovers, gunslinging bandits, ambitious seducers—that Ortega condemns. When considered as a novelistic whole, however, Valle’s *Sonatas* tetralogy divulges a slow pattern of decay and dissonance; although employing the same churlish, socially disconnected characters that Ortega criticizes, the evolution of these characters or, more specifically, the gradual transformation of the marqués de Bradomín, the series’ active protagonist, demonstrates a steady process of obsolescence.

Decay, deformation, and decadence become recurring textual leitmotifs for Valle-Inclán. Each of his works, from his earliest drama, *Cenizas* (1901), through his darker *esperpentos*, such as *Las galas del difunto* (1926) or *La hija del capitán* (1927), conveys an intentional sense of societal corrosion and eroding values. Even his initial novels, such as *Flor de santidad* (1904) or *La guerra carlista* trilogy (1908-1909), depict nostalgic notions of irredeemable loss, whether that be through a murdered Christ-figure or a futile struggle for political sovereignty. National, societal, and moral degeneration were common themes for members of Spain’s *Generación del ’98* and, unsurprisingly, critics immediately associate Valle-Inclán with Miguel de Unamuno, Pío Baroja, Ramiro de Maeztu, the Machado brothers, and Joaquín Costa, among other salient authors. Unique from his contemporary writers, however, Valle rejects any platitudes of national progress. His vision of an ideal society has already passed. He, like don Quijote, “is the victim of a social order in which he belongs to a class that has no function. [. . .] He wants to enforce his claim to the function proper to the class to which he belongs” (Auerbach 137). In other words,

he, like the fictional *caballero andante* before him, seeks to revitalize a past, contemporarily impossible societal model. His literary quest to record the events of “vinculeros y mayorazgos,” so similar in shape to don Quijote’s own inspirational mission to restore Spain’s Golden Age glory, resounds in forlorn hopelessness (Valle-Inclán *Entrevistas* 258). Unlike the delusional knight-errant before him, he is lucidly aware of its impossibility.

## II. A Decaying God

Valle’s destructive method, solidified and extensively applied in the *esperpentos*, gradually develops in his works, although particular clues, ranging from the death of a Christ figure in *Flor de santidad* to the disreputable rise of an ignoble aristocracy in *Las comedias bárbaras*, certainly acknowledge a society in clear religious and political decadence. “¡Ay de esta tierra!... ¡Ay de esta gente que no tiene caridad!” bemoans the nameless pilgrim in *Flor de santidad*, retributively warning, “¡Ay de esta gente!... ¡Dios la castigará!” (OC I 630). For Valle, God has long abandoned the Spanish people. His divine hand, the same hand that violently enforced the brutal tactics of the *Inquisición*, no longer enjoys the fanatical privileges and political prowess of the *Siglo de Oro*.

In the second book of the *Quijote*, Sancho is humorously required to whip himself 3,300 times in order to remove the terrible curse causing Dulcinea to be perceived as a peasant: “respondió Merlín, ‘porque llegando al cabal número, luego quedará de improvise desencantada la señora Dulcinea’” (829). When Sancho finally, albeit begrudgingly, begins ‘whipping’ himself, he confesses to the duchess that he only uses his “mano”:

Preguntó la duquesa a Sancho otro día si había comenzado la tarea de la penitencia que había de hacer por el desencanto de Dulcinea. Dijo que sí, y que

aquella noche se había dado cinco azotes. Preguntole la duquesa que con qué se los había dado. Respondió que con la mano.

—Eso—replica la duquesa—más es dares de palmadas que de azotes. Yo tengo para mí que el sabio Merlín no estará contento con tanta blandura: menester será que el buen Sancho haga alguna disciplina de abrojos, o de las de canelones, que se dejen sentir, porque la letra con sangre entra, y no se ha de dar tan barata la libertad de una tan gran señora como lo es Dulcinea, por tan poco precio; y advierta Sancho que las obras de caridad que se hacen tibia y flojamente no tienen mérito ni valen nada. (830)

This passage, comedic as it appears, is censored by the *Inquisición* due to its parodic connection with Erasmus and potential encouragement of self-flagellation, a practice prohibited by the Church at the time.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the *Inquisición* had the ability to expurgate entire sections of text, especially from a book as internationally famous as the *Quijote*, only reflects in part its pervasive power during Spain's Golden Age. By the turn of the twentieth century, religious zeal, in conjunction with the partial separation of the Church and State, notably diminishes.

In late nineteenth century Spain, confidence in divinity rapidly deteriorates on two fronts: first, on the national level, the Church, disempowered by the rise of liberalism after decades of dwindling public belief, has weakened politically and socially; second, at the philosophical level, Nietzsche pens his notorious dictum, “Gott ist tot” in 1882, inspiring budding Spanish philosophers—such as Manuel Azaña and José Ortega y Gasset, among others—to disconnect their ideas from metaphysics and constrain their focus on emerging societal, political, and

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, please consult Studiolum's “Un encuentro con la Inquisición” (2005).

aesthetic dilemmas, particularly at the national level.<sup>3</sup> “¿[Q]ué es la metafísica?” rhetorically asks Ortega in 1926, “[I]a metafísica... La metafísica es la más inútil de todas las ciencias” (OC III 432).<sup>4</sup> Earlier, in a 1909 Socialist conference, Ortega accuses Spain’s religious representatives (particularly the Jesuits) of spiritual hypocrisy:

Vosotros os llamáis representantes del espíritu; pero el espíritu es no más que una forma más sutil de la material, y así vuestro espiritualismo es, al cabo, materialismo. Frente a vuestro espíritu que es en verdad materia evaporada, materia volatilizada, nosotros traemos y afirmamos la única cosa que no es material: la idea. Aportamos una concepción científica de la naturaleza y la política, una visión más precisa y vigorosa de la moral, un sentimiento de mayor densidad estética. Traemos, señores, a España la justicia y la seriedad. Traemos una nueva religión; traemos la sublime eucarística: traemos la cultura. (OC X 127)

In Spain, a nation that has historically connected the Church and State, deemphasizing a transcendental, metaphysical entity (e.g., God) allows philosophers and thinkers to take aim at institutional and political reformation, as opposed to religious or personal improvement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Octavio Paz describes this religious distancing as a major characteristic of the Enlightenment and identifies David Hume (1711-1776) as one of its principal intellectuals:

Hume anticipó lo que ocurriría cincuenta años después: la razón adorada como una diosa y el ser supremo de los filósofos convertido en Jehová de sectas pedantes y sanguinarias. La crítica de la religión desplazó al cristianismo y en su lugar los hombres se apresuraron a entronizar a una nueva deidad: la política. El “instinto religioso” contó con la complicidad de la filosofía. Los filósofos substituyeron una creencia por otra: la religión revelada por la religión natural, la gracia por la razón. La filosofía profanó al cielo, pero consagró a la tierra; la consagración del tiempo histórico fue la consagración del cambio en su forma más intensa e inmediata: la acción política. (221-22)

<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of his career, Ortega grows much more sympathetic to metaphysics and recognizes in his 1932-1933 lectures given at the Universidad de Madrid, “Unas lecciones de metafísica,” the integral role metaphysics plays in philosophical investigation.

<sup>5</sup> Such was not always the case, as can easily be seen in some of Miguel de Unamuno’s later, more introspective essays and texts (e.g., his 1907 “Mi religión” or 1913 *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*).

Spiritual decadence stands as one of the multiple factors that contribute to the overall sentiment of societal depravation that percolates throughout Spain during the nineteenth century. In the face of escalating liberalism, the Church experiences political and economic upheaval, forcing its leaders to amortize their lands, restructure their sees, and deal with misbehaving priests. Indeed, concubinage, sacrilege, and superstition become recurring misdeeds among the clergy. The people, witnesses to the political, economic, and moral degeneration of the Church, grow increasingly incredulous and hostile towards its leaders and a rising tide of anticlericalism leads to catastrophic events such as 1834's *matanza de los frailes*, which resulted in the deaths of fifty-four clergymen. As an artist intimately aware of the historical discrepancies between his deplorable present and an idealized past, Valle-Inclán becomes intensely critical of the decaying Church.

As early as 1904, anticlericalism becomes a common theme in Valle's writings, most prominently in his novel, *Flor de santidad*, and later plays, *Divinas palabras* (1920) and *Sacrilegio* (1927). By integrating heretical figures such as a concupiscent (and later murdered) Christ figure, a married (and ultimately cuckolded) parishioner, and a bandit that assimilates the role of a priest, Valle manifestly directs his audience's attention to some of the most grievous complaints leveled at the Catholic Church during his time: an irretraceable distancing from its God, a corrupt clergy, and its insubstantially hollow traditions and rituals. Evident from his writings, Valle himself experiences a type of disillusionment with the Church at the turn of the century: no longer fettered to the ironclad mandate of Catholicism—a force in full control during the *Siglo de Oro*—, he retraces the steps of Christianity to the moment of its inception, exploring traditionally heretical modes of belief.

Valle's 1916 book of "ejercicios espirituales," *La lámpara maravillosa*, not only draws from basic forms of Christianity, but also employs Gnosticism in order to achieve enlightenment. Dissatisfied with the present condition of the Church and its leaders, Valle embarks on a spiritual voyage of self-discovery and hidden knowledge. He acquires insight into the cyclical pattern of nature—the rising sun must also set; the seasons predictably change from spring to summer, fall to winter, only for the cycle to repeat once more—and applies that same recurring model to societal degeneration as a whole. By invoking images of decay, corruption, and death in his aesthetic techniques, Valle also figuratively urges the cycle to come to a close. His destructive efforts, portrayed in part by his bitter anticlericalism, represent a growing societal need for rejuvenation in a time of spiritual crisis. The type of society he seeks to revitalize, however, has already come and gone; as Valle realizes in his *Sonatas*, the age of *hidalgos* has ended.

### III. Lost in Memory

Coinciding with Valle's resolute focus on decay and degeneration, his novelistic tetralogy, *Las sonatas*, render an aged don Juan, the marqués de Bradomín, whose days of romantic escapades all lie behind him. Thematically split into two halves, *Las sonatas* depict Bradomín's memories, from his youthful exploits as a successful seducer (*primavera, estío*) to his elderly blunders as a don Juan well past his prime (*otoño, invierno*). Valle's protagonist, a dashing triumphant playboy of the past, now must confront his dreary present. Sinking in debt, he, alongside Rubén Darío, walks through the graveyard of the penultimate scene in *Luces de Bohemia*, telling his friend that: "[n]ecesito dinero. Estoy completamente arruinado" (OC II 947). In an effort to reverse his misfortune, Bradomín resolves to sell his "memorias," but only after his death: "[m]is Memorias se publicarán después de mi muerte. Voy a venderlas como si

vendiese el esqueleto” (947). The only worthwhile thing that the marqués values from his life is his romantic past; his present, where each step takes him closer to his grave, is overrun with poverty and misery. Recalling Valle’s obsession with Spain’s noble past, Bradomín’s total fascination with his “juventud amorosa y apasionada” follows the same pattern of nostalgic idealization (OC I 49).

Whereas Don Quijote rides through La Mancha striving to right the moral insufficiencies of his era, the marqués de Bradomín makes no such effort—he recognizes his present as fallen and unsustainable. After reprimanding a cruel landowner for sadistically whipping one of his shepherds, don Quijote requires that he make restitution by paying his servant what is owed:

—Pagadle luego sin más réplica; si no, por el Dios que nos rige, que os concluya y aniquile en este punto. Desatadlo luego.

El labrador bajó la cabeza y, sin responder palabra, desató a su criado, al cual preguntó don Quijote que cuánto le debía su amo. Él dijo que nueve meses, a siete reales cada mes. Hizo la cuenta don Quijote y halló que montaban setenta y tres reales, y díjole al labrador que al momento los desembolsase, si no quería morir por ello. [. . .]

—El daño está, señor caballero, en que no tengo aquí dineros: véngase Andrés conmigo a mi casa, que yo se los pagaré un real sobre otro. (50)

Satisfied that the man will fulfill his word—“basta que yo se lo mande para que me tenga respeto; y con que él me lo jure por la ley de caballería que ha recibido, le dejaré ir libre y aseguraré la paga”—and that Andrés, the shepherd boy, will receive his just recompense for his severe lashing, despite the boy’s pleas to the contrary, don Quijote confidently continues on his

journey (50). The irony, as we learn from the narrator, is that the boy's master, as soon as don Quijote is out of earshot, again whips Andrés mercilessly:

—Venid acá, hijo mío, que os quiero pagar lo que os debo, como aquel desfacedor de agravios me dejó mandado. [. . .] Por lo mucho que os quiero, quiero acrecentar la deuda, por acrecentar la paga.

Y asiéndole el brazo, le tornó a atar a la encina, donde le dio tantos azotes, que le dejó por muerto. (51)

Don Quijote's overweening confidence in the word of a clearly treacherous landowner demonstrates a predominant naiveté that accompanies him throughout his adventures—despite the evident immorality of his time, he resolutely believes that it can be redeemed and that persons can be as good as their word.<sup>6</sup> Bradomín makes no such assumptions. Instead, he strives to bury his head in the sand of his memories, a distant time of seductive success and youthful *jouissance*.

While literary figures seem to possess a peculiar timelessness—in the pages of the *Quijote*, for example, Alonso Quijana will always begin his literary adventures “con los cincuenta años”—, the marqués de Bradomín, a self-identified “don Juan admirable” slowly yet definitively ages in *Las sonatas* (Cervantes 28; Valle-Inclán OC I 326). For a figure as mythically enduring as don Juan—a quality Ian Watt identifies as being “exceptionally widely known throughout the culture, that is credited with a historical or quasi-historical belief, and that embodies or symbolizes some of the most basic values of a society”—, his gradual advancing in

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<sup>6</sup> Referencing don Quijote's unmitigated confidence in his redemptive efforts, Ian Watt characterizes the self-identified *caballero andante* as a peculiar combination of “*arête* and *hubris*, an exceptional prowess and a vitiating excess, in spheres of action that are particularly important for our culture. Don Quijote [possesses] the impetuous generosity and the limiting blindness of chivalric idealism” (“*Robinson Crusoe*” 95). Further, and applicable due to the content of this section, Watt folds don Quijote and don Juan together as mythic figures of skill and excess; just as don Quijote consistently envisions, despite recurring evidence to the contrary, a chivalric world, “Don Juan pursu[es] and [is] at the same time tormented by the idea of boundless women” (95).

years starkly conflicts with Ortega's assertion that "don Juan no es un hecho, un acontecimiento, que es lo que fue de una vez para siempre, sino un tema eterno" (*Myths* xii; "Introducción" 121).<sup>7</sup> Ortega further explains that don Juan, even as we ourselves operate in a world that constantly conditions our existence—his famous 1914 maxim found in *Meditaciones del Quijote*, "[s]oy yo y mi circunstancia," encapsulates this belief at the personal level—, transforms according to his dramatic, literary, historical and cultural setting (77). Although a mythical figure with a predictable penchant for sexual gratification, don Juan is also essentially composed by the *circunstancia* in which he finds himself. As Ortega signals, "las figuras simbólicas son a modo de seres vivos que sufren las vicisitudes de los tiempos, cambian con ellos, degeneran y madurecen, tomando el vario cariz de las llamas humanas que en ellos se proyectan" ("Introducción" 122). Accordingly, the don Juan myth, while timeless, still reflects the prevalent dramatic ideologies of the moment of its creation.

In his 1963 book, *The Theater of Don Juan*, Oscar Mandel provides a comprehensive model for don Juan's dramatic evolution. Multiple renditions, ranging from the classical, *Siglo de Oro* standard, formulated by Tirso de Molina in 1630, through a romantic phase, popularized by Lord Byron and José Zorrilla, to a modern, "molecular" model, developed by writers such as Azorín and Edmond Rostand, that "ceases to enjoy himself" (25).<sup>8</sup> In every depiction, don Juan is shaped, molded, and inflected by his historical, cultural, and sociological setting. Mandel summarizes:

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<sup>7</sup> Oscar Mandel further elaborates on don Juan's mythical essence: "don Juan is not legend only. In our world he is also *myth*: he has become for us the permanent symbol of a particular human passion, activity, or aspiration" (10).

<sup>8</sup> Lord Byron begins his unfinished 'Epic Satire' in 1819. He dies five years later. José Zorrilla's incredibly popular play, *Don Juan Tenorio*, is first staged in 1844. Azorín's novel, *Don Juan*, appears in 1922 whereas Edmond Rostand's play, *La Dernière Nuit de Don Juan*, appears one year earlier. Valle-Inclán's *Sonatas* circulate between 1902 and 1905.

Don Juan never created a climate; he always responded to it, and in fact responded to it with almost academic perfection. With Tirso [1630], he is dully baroque; with Molière [1665], a courtly libertine[. . .] Da Ponte's hero [1787] is all eighteenth-century Italy, that is to say, philosophically vacant and utterly refined. With Grabbe [1828] he thickens into Romanticism—a late example of *Sturm und Drang* at its stormiest and most pressing. With Montherlant [1956] he is old, disabused, and analytic, as becomes our times. Always he beats with the pulse of his epoch. (21)

Following Mandel's evolutionary scheme, the marqués de Bradomín finds himself compressed between the Romantic and Molecular stages of don Juan's development.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, he straddles both sides of the don Juan matrix: his romantic vision of past seductions folds into his present reality of sexual failures and abject decrepitude. Valle's *Sonatas*, circumscribed by the four seasons, parallel the two seasons of growth and activity (spring and summer) with those of lethargy and obsolescence (fall and winter).

#### IV. Corruption and Conversion

A recurring theme in Valle's *oeuvre* follows the slow but certain demise of the *hidalguía*, a late feudal social caste that, allegedly devoted to the same standards as don Quijote and his chivalric heroes, has fallen into utter and irreversible disrepair by the turn of the twentieth century. His early novels (*Las sonatas* (1902-1905), *La guerra carlista* (1908-1909)) introduce the powerful and highly esteemed don Juan Manuel de Montenegro. His momentary arrival at

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<sup>9</sup> Mandel finds that instances of an aging don Juan, key attributes of his "molecular" persona, can be found as early as Guerra Junquero, a Portuguese poet who, in 1874, describes a putrefying don Juan in his final days. Indeed, as Mandel notes, "[t]he transition from the second to the third acts of don Juan's career is a gradual one" (26).

the Palacio de Brandeso in *Sonata de otoño* illustrates both his prestige and the respect his title demands. Pointing to the horizon, Bradomín asks Concha:

—¿Ves, allá lejos, un jinete?

—No veo nada.

—Ahora pasa la Fontela.

—Sí, ya le veo.

—Es el tío don Juan Manuel.

—¡El magnífico hidalgo del Pazo de Lantañón! [. . .]

Concha se apoyaba en la ventana riendo como una niña feliz:

—¡Es magnífico! [. . .]

Es verdad que era magnífico aquel don Juan Manuel de Montenegro. (OC I 485-86)

Captivated by Montenegro’s inexplicable magnificence, Bradomín reaches out to Florisel to ask him his opinion of the *hidalgo*, “¿[t]an gran señor te parece don Juan Manuel?” to which he replies, “[m]ejorando las nobles barbas que me oyen” (486). Niece and servant alike admire and venerate the powerful Montenegro who, on his way to Viana del Prior to assert his authority and “apalea a un escribano,” duly commands their respect (486). Despite his apparent magnificence and entitlement, certain cracks appear in his façade, tell-tale signs that he, like the marqués, has begun his decline.

Montenegro’s glorious arrival to the Palacio de Brandeso is overshadowed when the marqués calls down to let him know that the servants are rushing to open the garden gate. Unable to hear Bradomín’s shouting, Montenegro grows irritated. Bradomín describes the scene:

—¡Sobrina! ¡Sobrina! ¡Manda abrir la cancela del jardín!

Concha levantó los brazos indicándole que ya mandaba, luego, volviéndose a mí, exclamó riéndose:

—Dile tú que ya van.

Yo rugí, haciendo bocina con las manos:

—¡Ya van!

Pero don Juan Manuel no aparentó oírme. El privilegio de hacerse entender a tal distancia, no era suyo no más. Concha se tapó los oídos:

—Calla, porque jamás confesará que te oye.

Yo seguí rugiendo:

—¡Ya van! ¡Ya van!

Inútilmente. Don Juan Manuel se inclinó acariciando el cuello del caballo. Había decidido no oírme. (OC I 485)

His hearing loss, a flaw that Bradomín decides to ignore, opting to believe that Montenegro simply chooses to ignore his shouting, highlights only one of several of the *hidalgo*'s increasingly apparent deficiencies. After setting off on a trip to his estate, the Pazo de Lantañón, his horse, a “tordo montaraz y de poca alzada, de ojos bravíos y boca dura” startles, and Montenegro loses control, falling to the floor and losing consciousness (OC I 497). Fortunately, the marqués is nearby and manages to drag the *hidalgo*, “cubierto de sangre y de lodo” back to the Palacio de Brandeso (OC I 497). Montenegro's formidable character, like the marqués's seductive ability, depreciates over time and his flaws, initially perceivable through his prominent hearing loss and almost fatal horsemanship, mark the beginning of a gradual yet progressive decline.

Some three centuries before the *Sonatas*, Cervantes already detects and conceptualizes moral decay in Spain's aristocracy. In the second book of the *Quijote*, Sancho becomes the butt of an elaborate ruse designed by a Duke and Duchess. Bored by their lives of wanton leisure, they devise a scheme that fulfills don Quijote's promised *ínsula* to Sancho and ensures that Dulcinea's curse will be lifted. From Sancho's short (although strangely successful) role as governor of Barataria to Merlin's ominous disenchantment by three thousand lashes applied to Sancho's backside, he suffers according to the will of the cruel Duke and Duchess. As David Quint writes, "Cervantes may not envision, nor desire, the end of a dominant aristocratic class [. . .], but he does sharply criticize its culture. He exposes the cruelty, idleness, and injustice of a present-day high nobility that appears to have given up its martial and chivalric past and become an indolent courtier class" (131). Such an undignified attitude, one that mercilessly belittles the working class, reflects a deeper, endemic societal problem still occurring and magnified in Valle's day.

The social deficiencies that Quint recognizes in the Duke and Duchess in the second book of the *Quijote*—cruelty, idleness, injustice—directly parallel the shortcomings of don Juan Manuel de Montenegro's sons in Valle's dramatic trilogy, *Las comedias bárbaras* (1907-1908, 1922). Identified by their own father as "perversos," "ladrones," and "mostruos," Montenegro's children fall victim to the frailties of the rising aristocracy, a passive generation of "señoritos satisfechos" who apathetically follow the will and direction of the masses (OC II 280, 491, 505). Despite three hundred years of development, aristocratic degeneration remains the same. Valle's plays, a stark reminder of the moralistic decay of a societal caste he fervently admires and

eulogizes, convey, by implementing similar social strategies as urged by Ortega y Gasset, an urgent message of transformation to the floundering nobility.<sup>10</sup>

In the final play of the trilogy, *Romance de lobos*, Montenegro finally abdicates his *mayorazgo* to his sons, granting them their inherited right to his estate, fortune, and name. Grief-stricken over the death of his wife, doña María, a “santa,” Montenegro only seeks out a cave where he can die alone (OC II 491). Upon discovering a final resting place, however, he also finds a new reason for living.

Caught in the midst of a torrential downpour, another family, a penniless mother and her four destitute children, seek refuge in Montenegro’s cave after receiving a stern rejection at the doors of his former estate. Unable to constrain his anger any longer, Montenegro exclaims:

¡Haré respetar mi voluntad! Los muertos serán sepultos y amparados los vivos. Se cumplirán todas las mandas que ordené. Venid conmigo, y en el umbral de mi casa me veréis pedir una limosna para vosotros. Después, cúmplanse tus maldiciones, y lleven los perros por este arenal mi corazón desesperado. (OC II 513)

His outburst comes as the fulfillment of an earlier prophecy, one that foretells his conversión from a decaying *hidalgo* into a defender of the rights of the poor. Earlier in the play, he portentously explains to El pobre de San Lázaro and his group of beggars that:

La redención de los humildes hemos de hacerla los que nacimos con ímpetu de señores cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias. ¡En la mía se hace esa luz

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<sup>10</sup> Such strategies include Ortega’s desire for an enlightened nobility (sharply contrasting with Spain’s present aristocratic class—a group he considers “esa específica bobería de las viejas noblezas, que no se parece a nada” in his 1930 *Rebelión de las masas* (147)) and earnest efforts to revitalize his society through knowledge, intellect, and ethics (a theme introduced in *España invertebrada* (1921) and broadly developed as “raciovitalismo” in *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923)). Gonzalo Sobejano, in his article, “Valle-Inclán frente al realismo español,” indicates that, “más que un influjo de Valle-Inclán en Ortega o de éste en aquél, lo que hubo desde muy pronto fue una concordancia de criterios y una comunicación dialogal de ambos mediante palabras habladas o escritas” (171).

de tempestad! Ahora, entre vosotros, me figuro que soy vuestro hermano y que debo ir por el mundo con la mano extendida, y como nací señor, me encuentro con más ánimo de bandolero que de mendigo. ¡Pobres miserables, almas resignadas, hijos de esclavos, los señores os salvaremos cuando nos hagamos cristianos! (OC II 466)

This transformation requires a moment of enlightenment (“cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias”), an outpouring of charity (“debo ir por el mundo con la mano extendida”), and a renewed dedication to essentially Christian ideals (“los señores os salvaremos cuando nos hagamos cristianos”). In a world where the aristocracy has, over the course of three centuries, become increasingly implacable, the time has come for reformation and revitalization.

Valle, like Ortega y Gasset, has grown disgusted with the rising aristocratic class. Exemplified through Montenegro’s unruly and disobedient children, the values extolled by figures as idealistic as don Quijote—chivalry, honor, integrity, etc.—are no longer practiced by the nobility. Instead, nobility has, according to Ortega, decayed into a frustratingly useless caste:

Así, en el “aristócrata” heredero toda su persona se va envagueciendo, por falta de uso y esfuerzo vital. El resultado es esa específica bobería de las viejas noblezas, que no se parece a nada y que, en rigor, nadie ha descrito todavía en su interno y trágico mecanismo; el interno y trágico mecanismo que conduce a toda aristocracia hereditaria a su irremediable degeneración. (*Rebelión* 147)

Ortega’s philosophical efforts amount to a total revaluation of Spain’s intellectual and cultural nobility, challenging authors to confront its aristocracy in its present, decadent state. Valle’s *Comedias bárbaras* uniquely and assiduously apply the degenerative aesthetic to the rising aristocracy, urging its members to follow in the footsteps of Montenegro by sloughing off the

centuries-long “bobería” that has dominated their way of thinking for far too long. Dissatisfied with an ignoble nobility, Valle, through Juan Manuel de Montenegro, encourages the *hidalgos* to restore their values by adapting them to the needs of the present.

## V. Distorted Mirrors

A critical feature of Valle’s theory of the *esperpento* has to do with the deforming reflections created by a concave mirror. As explained by Max Estrella, the protagonist of Valle’s first formally recognized *esperpento*, *Luces de Bohemia*, “[l]os héroes clásicos reflejados en los espejos cóncavos dan el Esperpento. El sentido trágico de la vida española sólo puede darse con una estética sistemáticamente deformada” (OC II 933). While aesthetic deformation already plays a prominent role in Valle’s writings, his esperpentic works systematically rely on this technique in order to convey their message of societal and cultural degeneration. Emphatically, Sumner M. Greenfield explains, “es la España misma el ‘héroe clásico’ y la ‘imagen bella’ dirigidos al espejo cóncavo de los esperpentos, y el reflejo devastador es un país infestado de la mediocridad a todo nivel y en todo rincón: intelectual, literaria, política y social” (“Reflejos” 314). A sporadic characteristic featured throughout his texts, decadence and decay do not become the primary aesthetic motifs—i.e., “una estética sistemáticamente deformada”—until 1920, when Valle begin writing his *esperpentos* in earnest. Under the model of *esperpentismo*, the images reflected in the famous mirror of realism, a mimetic literary device M. H. Abrams exhaustively discusses in his classic 1953 work, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, come back distorted, misshapen, and disfigured. Instead of faithfully depicting the perceptible image of reality, it deforms that image, unveiling an inward undercurrent of corruption, scandal, lies, and deceit that plague Spanish life at the turn of the century.

Valle's acutely precise societal reflections, displayed through the *esperpento*, counter exceptionally well the modernist agenda, whose goal, at the most rudimentary level, is to dispute all claims to realism and objectivity. While the playwright embarks on a subjectively-inflected project (his personal view of Spanish life as decay and delusion), his goal has an objective function: to lay waste to social etiquette and accepted norms, revealing the crass underbelly of a Spanish society in moral shambles. On one hand, Valle's *esperpentos* are hyper-realistic to a fault, bordering on the revolting and the irrepresentable. On the other hand, however, this eccentric dramatic form is characteristically mis-(and even under-)represented; to try to do so in a realistic manner would be to work with that which is socially acceptable, essentially undercutting Valle-Inclán's entire project.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the esperpentic mode of representation, a gross exaggeration of societal and moral deficiencies, achieves what realism and testimonial melodrama cannot: an accurate and intense reflection of society's darkest visage.

According to Harold Bloom, don Quijote, like Valle-Inclán, lives in a fallen world. In the *Quijote*, writes Bloom, "[t]he spiritual atmosphere of a Spain already in steep decline can be felt throughout" and that "it is simultaneously a work whose authentic subject is literature and a chronicle of a hard, sordid actuality, the declining Spain of 1605-15" ("Knight"). Cervantes, according to Bloom, cuts against the pervasive decadence of the late Spanish Golden Age by presenting a figure as idealistic (yet intensely aware of his illusion, according to Bloom) as the so-called knight errant. His redemptive quest categorically responds to a society in need of redemption. Valle-Inclán, on the other hand, holds society up to the distorting effect of a concave

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<sup>11</sup> Valle's *esperpentos* acutely contrast with the more prevalent, popular melodramatic productions of José Echegaray (1832-1916). Obeying a traditional yet uninspiring tragicomic formula, Echegaray's drab thematic content comes nowhere near Valle's penetrating criticisms of a decadent society. On the disparity between Spanish realism and the esperpentic aesthetic, I direct the reader to Gonzalo Sobejano's "Valle-Inclán frente al realismo español." John Lyon provides an excellent summary of the major critical approaches to staging (and not staging) Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos* in his 1969 article, "Valle-Inclán and the Art of Theatre."

mirror, implying that the distended reflections imitate the moral degradation of his present society. Projecting traditional literary and dramatic heroes such as don Juan, the perennial Spanish seducer, or Shakespeare's Othello, the personification of Spain's hidebound adherence to a rigid sense of honor, before the distorting effect of the concave mirror, he exacerbates their flaws and exaggerates their deficiencies—Juanito Ventolera robs his bride-to-be father's corpse of his clothing; don Friolera's shame causes him to accidentally shoot his daughter instead of his unfaithful wife—in order to suggest that his era fares no better. Valle draws from the same figures that originate during “a Spain already in steep decline” (according to Bloom) in order to identify and sharply critique the corrupt corollaries between the early sixteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Valle's theory of the *esperpento*, described as a third way of conceiving literary and dramatic characters, is based on a notion of authorial distancing—a model he identifies with the “manera de demiurgo”—that he first recognizes in Cervantes (*Entrevistas* 395). After explaining that the first two perspectives, from one's knees—when the audience idolizes the characters—and from eye-level—when the audience considers itself equal to the characters—, Valle elaborates:

Y hay otra tercera manera, que es mirar al mundo desde un plano superior, y considerar a los personajes de la trama como seres inferiores al autor, con un punto de ironía. Los dioses se convierten en personajes de sainete. Esta es una manera muy española, manera de demiurgo, que no se cree en modo alguno hecho del mismo barro que sus muñecos. Quevedo tiene esta manera. Cervantes, también. A pesar de la grandeza de don Quijote, Cervantes se cree más cabal y más cuerdo que él, y jamás se emociona con él. (*Entrevistas* 395)

In a very real sense, the *esperpento* finds its roots in the *Quijote*. Whether that be through the ridiculous puppets of Maese Pedro or don Quijote's inability to suspend his disbelief, Valle detects a hierarchal separation between Cervantes and his characters. He further relates that

Cervantes se siente superior a don Quijote. Se burla un poco de él, se compadece, a veces, de sus dolores y locuras, le perdona sus arrebatos, y hasta le concede la gracia de una hora postrera de cordura para conducirlo, generoso, a las puertas del cielo. Los autores españoles, juvenilmente endiosados, gustamos de salpicar con un poco de dolor la existencia que creamos. Por capricho y por fuerza. Porque nos asiste la indignación de lo que vemos ocurrir fatalmente a nuestros pies. (Madrid *La vida activa* 345).

The esperpentic view requires a certain authorial distancing between the characters and their creator. In Valle's mind, this distancing parallels the social deficiencies of a clearly decadent society. The dramaturge, especially the *esperpentista*, has the duty to distort and deform his characters. In so doing, he reflects, as would a concave mirror, the flaws and frailties of a society in crisis.

## **VI. Destructive Renewal**

This dissertation investigates the rationale behind Ramón del Valle-Inclán's culminating theatrical technique, his morbidly dark, culturally caustic, and societally damning *esperpento*. I am specifically interested in the religious, historical, cultural, artistic, philosophical, and theatrical factors that contributed to its development. From modernist beginnings (exemplified by several of his short stories and *Las sonatas*), he artistically travels through a post-feudal period in Spanish history when its final vestiges of nobility sink into disrepair; the supposedly

noble values associated with this caste, like its bearers, have been abandoned. All that remains, as Max Estrella somberly concludes in the twelfth scene of *Luces de Bohemia*, “es una deformación grotesca de la civilización europea” (OC II 933).

As a whole, I will consider Valle-Inclán’s novels, plays, and poetry in order to recognize a latent, albeit ever-present, current of decadence and degeneration in his works. I propose that primary manifestations of the same characteristics that critics have come to integrally associate with his *esperpentos*—brazen anticlericalism, aesthetic deterioration, apathetic immorality—appear throughout his works as a whole. Such an assertion implies that Valle’s dramatic theory of the *esperpento* represents the accumulation and adaptation of the theme of decay, absence, and estrangement in a diverse array of textual forms, ranging from poetry and drama, novel and short story. Like Valle’s own gradual disillusionment with his nation, his people, and his politics, the *esperpentos* are forged by an agonizingly decadent society whose depiction—partial images of corruption that can be found throughout the full spectrum of Valle’s literary and dramatic productions—only fully materializes in the *esperpentos* themselves.

Valle’s esperpentic efforts amount to a destructive vision of Spanish civilization at the opening of the twentieth century. His *esperpentos* discredit any notions of religious morality, political stability, artistic empathy, or civic duty—qualities praised and extolled by the melodramatic testimonial theater popularized by José de Echegaray (1832-1916)—in Spain at the turn of the century. Their dark, disturbing content casts a penetrating gaze at the deficiencies of the era, exaggerating and exacerbating the flaws of a culture in crisis. Valle’s vision, so focused on the age of *hidalgos* and contemporary decadence, rejects the challenges faced in his present day and actively seeks to undermine their significance. One of his primary aesthetic goals, as becomes clear through a careful analysis of the theme of death and redemption in his

works, is, despite its impossibility, to restore feudal privilege to Spain at a time when it can no longer be considered a viable societal model. His *esperpentos* function as a societal sledgehammer that identifies and smashes the cultural deficiencies of his era in order to convey the aesthetic beauty, moral integrity, and political stability of *hidalguismo* with a degree of ironic distance and mockery.

The destructive attitude Valle adopts in his *esperpentos* sharply contrasts with don Quijote's redemptive mentality. Whereas the former solely favors what came before and not his deplorable reality, the latter believes in humanity's redemptive potential in the present. Their goals, while similar in nostalgic scope, are realized for two very different purposes: don Quijote genuinely believes that he, through chivalric acts of knight-errantry, can redeem his fallen society; Valle harbors no such illusions—the settings, characters, and events that he reifies portray the demise of a world beyond his reach. Against all odds, don Quijote has not given up the dream; Valle, however, resigns to his fate: without a horse, without a lance, and without a hope, he walks the lonely path of nostalgia and recollection.

## Chapter 1 - A Setting Son: Religious Decay and Secularization in Spain

Ráfagas de ocaso, dunas escampadas  
La luz y la sombra gladiando en el monte:  
Mítica tragedia de rojas espadas  
Y alados mancebos sobre el horizonte.  
-Valle-Inclán “Rosa de llamas”

### I. Sunset

Loaded with metaphorical possibility, one can read the initial and final stanzas of Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s poem, “Rosa de llamas,” as an allegory of Spanish decadence visualized through his preferred aesthetic medium: the *esperpento*. In a now famous 1928 interview with G. Martínez Sierra, Valle directs that, “hay tres modos de ver el mundo, artística o estéticamente: de rodillas, en pie o levantado en el aire” (*Entrevistas* 394). The third method, observing the world from up above, raised in the air, becomes synonymous with the technique he develops in his *esperpentos*, a deeply cynical, fully detached perspective that allows the playwright to deform literary classical heroes in order to reflect the grotesque reality of Spanish decadence.<sup>1</sup> In the poem, the winged youth, soaring far above the horizon, have achieved the superior position demanded by the *esperpento*. Already distorted from Icarus’s mythology and his tragic demise, their flight at sunset ensures a safe voyage, free from melting wax or wilting wings. Their observations, framed by the warm glow of the setting sun and its inexorable descent towards dusk, appear in the middle of the poem:

La culebra de un sendero tenebroso,  
La sombra lejana de uno que camina,  
Y en medio del yermo el perro rabioso  
Terrible el gáñido de su sed canina.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Estrella, in Valle’s 1920 play, *Luces de bohemia*, famously remarks, “[l]os héroes clásicos reflejados en los espejos cóncavos, dan el Esperpento. El sentido de la vida española sólo puede darse con una estética sistemáticamente deformada” (OC II 933).

The crepuscular figure, whose long shadow stretches along the winding path, walks a lonely road towards eminent danger. Valle further describes the personage as, “la sombra sombría del que va sin bienes, / El alma en combate, la expresión frenética, / Y un ramo de venas saltante en las sienas” (OC II 1231). Poor, soulfully torn, and lost in thought, the figure’s lot resembles that of Max Estrella, the blind artist and hopeless protagonist of Valle’s *Luces de bohemia*.<sup>2</sup> Max laments, “[e]l primer poeta de España! ¡El primero! ¡El primero! ¡Y ayuno! ¡Y no me humillo pidiendo limosna! ¡Y no me parte un rayo!” (OC II 895). Penniless yet proud, he suffers the tragic fate of the Spanish artist at the turn of the century: public disregard.

Conceptualizing the poetic figure as an artist himself vividly creates a description of aesthetic turmoil and artistic responsibility. The poem continues:

Lóbrega su estrella le alumbra el sendero  
 Con un torbellino de acciones y ciencias:  
 Las torvas blasfemias por pan justiciero,  
 Y las utopías de nuevas conciencias

With modernist sensitivity, the poet-playwright implies that in order to develop a new aesthetic, e.g., the *esperpento*, the artist must negotiate a flurry of ideas, his way lit only by the murky glow of a flickering star or, in Valle’s case, a marvelous lamp. In his 1916 text, *La lámpara maravillosa*, he attempts to map out his difficult aesthetic model, recurring to mystic and gnostic imagery. Esoteric and complex, the text itself exemplifies the struggle an artist faces in trying to expound his original ideas. What remains clear, however, is the need for light in the darkness, be it the trembling flame of a lamp or the dim sparkle of a star.

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<sup>2</sup> The archetypal potential of this shadowy personage yields multiple interpretations. While the role of poet/artist is explored here, Valle creates a Christ-like pilgrim in his *Flor de la santidad* (1904) that undoubtedly corresponds with the same figure introduced in the poem. The latter connection will be explored in section VI of this chapter.

With the sun slowly setting and darkness creeping in, “Rosa de llamas,” becomes a powerful metaphor for Spanish decadence. The empire, so long construed as a place where the sun never set, has entered, at the close of the nineteenth century, a period of progressive deterioration and growing political turmoil. The “ocaso” referred to in the poem assumes national proportions when held up to the dying light of the Spanish empire; its eminent sunset predicts the disappearance of imperial and, as will be discussed below, spiritual sovereignty.

Not to be forgotten, however, is the creative potential enabled by the sunset. In the poem, Valle’s new aesthetic paradigm, perceived far above the horizon, provides a new, albeit agonizingly destructive mode for assessing Spanish life at the beginning of the twentieth century. While clearly a symbol for decadence and death, sunset also allows space for artistic creativity and experimentation. Metaphorically speaking, the sun may be setting on Spain, but rising from the darkness is a new means of artistic expression: the *esperpento*.

Before attempting to trace the aesthetic parameters involved in creating the *esperpento*, I will carefully focus on the historical circumstances surrounding its development. The following chapter considers the conflictive spiritual and political dimensions of Spanish life during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dictated by the rise of liberalism and the ensuing ecclesiastical reaction. Church and State wage several battles for political power over the span of the nineteenth century, grievously exemplified by the Carlist Wars, up until their final scission in 1873. Spain, stumbling out of the Spanish American War in 1898, finally recedes into a period of terrible decadence—economically bankrupt, morally aimless, and politically split. A far cry from the imperial grandeur of the Spanish Golden Age, the nation devolves into a parody of its former glory.

## II. Sonset

It goes without question that the prototypical hegemonic power during the early sixteenth century was Carlos V's Holy Roman Empire. Coming to power some thirty years after the *Año de maravillas* (1492), Carlos spent the first decade of his reign consolidating Spanish power on the American continent. By 1545, so extensive was the global reach of his dominion that Fray Francisco de Ugalde superlatively describes it as “the empire on which the sun never sets.” The description later becomes synonymous with any nation possessing extensive global power: in the late seventeenth century, Louis XIV adopts his famous emblem as the Sun King; the Bourbon kings in the eighteenth century added, “A solis ortu usque ad occassum” to their Royal Arms; and the nineteenth century saw the British Empire commonly use the phrase to describe its international breadth. In a venerable nod to Carlos V's original dominion, the “sun never sets” aphorism becomes a title of prestige and power.

Between 1545 and 1898, drastic national upheaval and territorial permutations transform the Spanish empire until, after the loss of Puerto Rico and Cuba, Spain's final American colonies, the nation finds itself confined within its original Iberian borders. Bankrupt and militarily depleted from the heavy toll exerted by the contentious nineteenth century, aimless after numerous political failures, not the least of which is the First Spanish Republic, and overwhelmingly suppressive in its educational reform, the sun, in a metaphorical sense, has finally set on the Spanish empire. María Zambrano describes 1898 as, “el año en que España pierde las últimas posesiones de su imperio, de un imperio que nunca fue comercial. Y así se quedó en su ocaso, pobre, aislada políticamente, casi muda, casi inexistente; separada del mundo y de sí misma” (“Valle-Inclán”). Following a similarly decadent course at the close of the

century, Spanish Catholicism becomes increasingly disenfranchised by tumultuous political reform.

By 1898, the Church, so intimately tied with the Spanish majesty of the Golden Age, no longer has the political clout nor the economic capacity to contribute to national development. Stymied by the restrictions set into place by the several ruling liberal administrations beginning with the *Cortes de Cádiz* (1810) until its ultimate separation from the State by the First Republic (1873), the Church's political power virtually disappears. Its firm resolve to return to an already outdated model of absolute monarchy does nothing but push it further from the thoroughly liberal powers of the nineteenth century. Complicating matters, Juan Álvarez Mendizábal in 1835 initiates a process of *desamortización*, auctioning off Church properties in order to generate State revenue; a practice that lasts two years, only to be reinstated by the *moderados* in 1843. Politically and territorially shrinking, the Church struggles to remain relevant at the twilight of the nineteenth century.

With their political backing deteriorating, Church leaders grow further disaffected with politics, causing a division among the believers. On one hand, staunch defenders of the faith refuse to reform according to the direction of the State and, opting to side with the swelling *carlista* movement, become both revolutionary and militant; on the other hand, some priests choose to walk a careful line between conservatism and liberalism, siding with the *moderados*, a right-leaning political group dedicated to factoring Christian values into the development of the nation. Under fire from the *progresistas*, who seek to unequivocally separate Church and State, the clergy strives to reinvent itself by employing the same liberal tactics that their opponents had used for years and, in 1840, a new, effective Catholic press emerges.

Three periodicals become the mainstay of the new Catholic journalism: *La Revista Católica* of Barcelona, *El Católico* of Madrid, and *La Cruz* of Sevilla (Callahan *Church* 174). Each deals with the difficult situation confronting the Church in the face of dwindling political prestige and aims to protect, some more stridently than others, Christian values despite the “diabolical spirit of the revolutionary government of Madrid,” according to a supporter of the Church (qtd. in Callahan *Church* 166). As *El Católico* professes, its purpose was, “to defend the Catholic religion which is designated as the religion of the Spains in the fundamental code of the nation [ . . . ] by the means authorized by law” (qtd. in Callahan *Church* 175). This journalistic maneuver enjoys a surprising degree of national success and becomes a stalwart voice for the Church during a time of growing incredulity.

By the 1830s, faith in traditional beliefs, as espoused by Christian dogma, has slowly eroded from public consciousness. Anticlericalism becomes the norm for a society where liberal politics has a stranglehold. The people grow increasingly antagonistic towards Church leaders, leading to disastrous results, such as the *matanza de frailes* of 1834. As Callahan relates:

On the afternoon of July 17, crowds drawn from the lower classes, but with the significant participation of urban militiamen, gathered in three of Madrid’s squares, the Plaza Mayor, the Puerta del Sol, and the Plazuela de la Cebada. At the cry, “Poison! poison! Death to the Jesuits! Death to the friars!” the mobs converged on the Jesuit church of San Isidro and the adjoining Colegio Imperial. [ . . . ] The crowd invaded the Jesuit house and murdered fourteen priests, including several who had escaped to the streets only to be identified immediately because they wore hats in the heat to disguise their tonsures. [ . . . ] The same scenes were repeated at the Dominican priory of Santo Tomás, although most of its friars

escaped at news of the earlier assault. The Franciscans of San Francisco were less fortunate: forty perished in a ferocious attack that saw some stabbed, some drowned in the wells, some hanged, and others hurled to their deaths from the rooftops where they had taken refuge. (*Church* 153-54)

A dark cloud hangs over the Church at this time, with clergymen justifiably fearing for their lives.

Returning to the earlier aphorism, Spain, especially in the eyes of the believers, metaphorically experiences two types of sunset: the decline of political prestige paired with religious disbelief; in other words, a sunset coupled with a *sonset*. The charitable gospel presented by the son of God and his apostles, and now allegedly professed by the Catholic Church, loses meaning during Spain's nineteenth century. Christ's teachings of love, patience, and longsuffering fall on the deaf ears of the ostensibly bloodthirsty public body. In a 1911 interview with Gregorio Campos, Valle-Inclán describes the moral decay of his Spanish compatriots, "ahonda más las diferencias, un egoísmo señalado en ciertas clases elevadas, y el odio reconcentrado en las inferiores, y en ambas, un meditado alejamiento del sentir cristiano; hace falta *caridad* en unos, dejación de *orgullo* en otros" (*Entrevistas* 86). The fervent conviction expressed by Spaniards during the reign of Carlos V—fanatical devotion that instigated the Inquisition and dutifully spread Christianity across the American continent—has metamorphosed into growing anticlericalism. It comes as no wonder that one can trace the dwindling attendance at the Easter Communion in the Parish of Santiago el Real (Logroño), from a mere 6.68% of nonobservants in 1860 to a surprising 57.8% thirty years later (*Callahan Church* 245).

Attendance at the time mirrors religious passion; if formerly fervent Catholics can no longer

muster the conviction necessary to attend Mass, what does this mean for Church leadership, or even the institution as a whole?

The Church at the turn of the century faces a precarious situation of decay: progressive political irrelevance, swelling apathy towards its leaders, and atrophic belief amongst its followers all point to an eminent religious crisis. As Serenín de Bretal, a character in Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras* shrewdly observes, “[e]stá el mundo desgobernado. Ya las bestias se vuelven sin miramiento para comerse a los cristianos” (OC II 575). Sharing in the sentiment of his fellow Spaniards, increasing disbelief and incredulity can be traced through Valle-Inclán's work, beginning with his earlier novels, including *Flor de santidad* and *La guerra carlista* trilogy, threading through his plays, exemplified by *Divinas palabras* and *Sacrilegio*, and culminating with the darkly cynical *esperpentos*, embodied by *Luces de bohemia* and *Las galas del difunto*. Valle's growing antagonism towards the Church reflects his own drifting from the heavy moral and ethical mandates—in large part unpracticed by the corrupt clergy at the turn of the twentieth century—presupposed by Catholic doctrine.

Valle fervently yearns for a bygone feudalistic era, when the nobility ruled by hereditary privilege and the Church by and large followed its own teachings. Retreating back to the very origins of traditional Christianity, Valle discovers Gnosticism, a mode of belief that, while categorized as heretical, professes similar values accessible through personal and esoteric knowledge. By combining Gnosticism and his own Christian inheritance, Valle develops a peculiar type of faith, criticizing and ultimately rejecting the Church in its present, dilapidated state in order to initiate a process of renewal and regeneration, a model he illustrates with the death of the pilgrim, an allegorical Christ-figure, in his *Flor de Santidad*. His literary efforts to dismantle the Spanish Church underscore his determination to move beyond the insincere

gestures of its practitioners at the turn of the century. In a sense, his anticlerical works serve as catalysts for achieving his destructive goals. By exposing the Church's shortcomings, he also points towards its end, like a flickering candle awaiting a douter, its light has long faded to a pale yellow, a pitiful reflection of its former radiance. Valle eagerly awaits its extinguishment and the creative potential promised by the "divina tiniebla" (OC I 1907). He walks a dark road, like his protagonist in "Rosa de llamas," and, in the midst of that darkness, uncovers the aesthetic promise of renewal, a sunrise after the sunset.

### III. Carlism

Hindered both religiously and politically, Spain suffers another blow with the death of Fernando VII in 1833. Three years before passing away, he revokes the semi-Salic law, passing the crown to his daughter, Isabel II, and not his brother, Carlos. This triggers the first Carlist war, with the *carlistas* combating Isabel's claim to the throne. Valle-Inclán's 1908 trilogy, *La guerra carlista*, fictionally traces the development of this war from the perspective of his perennial protagonist, El marqués de Bradomín, and provides a backdrop for the violent events of the 1830s.

An aging *hidalgo* in a post-feudalistic society, the marqués fights for the rights of nobility in a nation dominated by liberal ideas. He ruminates:

¡El genio del linaje!... Lo que nunca pudo comprender el liberalismo, destructor de toda la tradición española. Los mayorazgos eran la historia del pasado y debían ser la historia del porvenir. [. . .] El pueblo está degradado por la miseria, y la nobleza cortesana por las adulaciones y los privilegios, pero los hidalgos, los

secos hidalgos de la gotera, eran la sangre más pura, destilada en un filtro de mil años y de cien guerras. (OC I 711)

Gone are the days of *El mío Cid* and chivalric romances, of wandering *hidalgos* and aspiring knights errant, of gallant gentry and faithful servants. The leveling blow of liberalism has smashed the social stratification of a bygone era, providing a new foundation for governmental reform. Its broadly democratic principles run against the staunchly conservative tenets of Carlism. Facing the annihilation of aristocratic privilege, it comes as no surprise that *hidalgos*, such as El marqués de Bradomín, take up arms to defend what is rightfully theirs by tradition. Not unlike his protagonist, Valle also harbors special admiration for aristocratic principles. As Alberca relates, “Valle proviene [. . .] por ambas ramas familiares, sobre todo por la maternal, del mundo de los hidalgos, esa nobleza menor que fue uno de los viveros naturales del carlismo y del tradicionalismo decimonónico y una de las grandes sacrificadas de las transformaciones políticas” (*Valle-Inclán* 126). He clings to his noble inheritance by allying with Carlism despite the slow and steady decline of the Spanish aristocracy.

Born in Villanueva de Arosa, a small town in the province of Pontevedra, Galicia, in 1866, some thirty years after the first Carlist war, Valle experiences a childhood far removed from the combat and political upheaval instigated by the third *carlista* uprising in 1872. By July of 1873, after a string of successful Carlist victories, the cry for independent republican city-states, or cantons, rings out across the nation, threatening to destroy the fragile national government. Valle’s affection for the Carlist movement, as has been well-documented by Juan

Durán and Pedro José Zabala in their text, *Valle-Inclán y el carlismo*, reflects a deep concern for his fractured nation.<sup>3</sup> Robert Lima clarifies:

Valle promoted an enlightened monarchy that would unite Spain spiritually as well as physically in an attempt to regain its past greatness. He saw Carlism as the ideology that could effect this end and [. . .] espoused its cause with intellectual fervor. Clearly to him, provincial self-rule would only bring about deterioration of the national spirit and eventual collapse of the political entity that was Spain.

*(Theatre 17)*

For Valle, restoring the Carlist pretender to power would result in political stability and national integrity. In his eyes, the movement fights for a past, albeit effective, form of government, something that Spain desperately needs at the end of the nineteenth century.

In *Los cruzados de la causa*, Valle's first book in *La guerra carlista* trilogy, El marqués de Bradomín in no uncertain terms criticizes his present government. "La facción republicana que ahora manda," snarls the marqués, "es una vergüenza para España" (OC I 679). His cousin, the *hidalgo* Juan Manuel de Montenegro complains that, "[I]as leyes, desde que se escriben, ya son malas" (719). Even an unnamed citizen concurs that, "[e]n las Españas [referring to the Carlist/Isabelina dichotomy], pasa que todos los que mandan son unos ladrones" (698).

Thoroughly anti-liberal, the opinions expressed by Valle's characters also reflect upon the author himself. Undeniably disenchanted by liberalism, he uses literature to express his dismay towards Spanish leadership. As Lima indicates, "[t]he appeal of Carlism for Valle-Inclán was its high ethical ideals and its sacrificial position, both of which placed [it] within the cause of

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<sup>3</sup> Critics unquestionably associate Valle's earlier attitude with Carlism but, after 1920 and the publication of *Luces de Bohemia*, many assume that his political sympathies morph into aesthetic sensitivities, giving rise to socially and nationally destructive scenarios in his *esperpentos*.

righteousness and encouraged rebellion against the political hypocrisy of the established order” (*Theatre* 86). As a proponent of a dying cause (the third war closes in defeat in 1876), the Galician’s powerful loyalty to a time when Carlists were united in a single purpose—to overthrow the Bourbon monarch of Isabel’s lineage—belies the movement’s disarray in 1889.

Cándido Nocedal, Carlos VII’s former Spanish delegate, breaks away from Carlism and, following his death in 1885, his son Ramón forms the Partido Ingresista Español, a group that, “remained intransigently Carlist in ideology, that is, deeply hostile to liberalism and the liberal State but free of dynastic entanglements” (Callahan *Catholic* 32, n. 43). In fewer words, Nocedal practiced Carlism without a Carlist pretender. Politically, he continues to abhor liberalism (as expected from a Carlist), but has no regal aspirations, betraying the movement’s namesake. By the time Valle reaches adulthood, Carlism, fractured and impotent after the Nocedal split, has receded into nothing more than a noble idea lacking the firepower necessary to alter the political climate.

#### IV. Militant Catholicism

As noted earlier, several members of the clergy, especially from the Northern territories, opt to side with the *carlistas* during their third war (1872-76). The movement swiftly gains traction as it appeals to restore the long-abandoned *fueros* (privileges regarding regional autonomy), bolstering its numbers with both Basque and Catalan recruits. In a sense, the clergymen of the North, to borrow and reverse the biblical phrase, beat their plowshares into swords, taking up arms for the Carlist cause.<sup>4</sup> Manuel de Santa Cruz, the parish priest of

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<sup>4</sup> Valle beautifully summarizes, through the thoughts of the priest Manuel de Santa Cruz in *Gerifaltes de antaño*, the role of the religious militant: “[i]ba a ser solo. Haría la guerra a sangre y fuego, con el bello sentimiento de su idea y el odio del enemigo. La guerra que hacen los pueblos, cuando el labrador deja su siembra y su hato el pastor” (OC I 843).

Hernialde, a small town in the Basque Country, was among the most feared militant priests and “felt no scruples at having twenty prisoners shot without confession” (Callahan *Church* 267). So notorious was Santa Cruz that Valle uses him as a ring-leader for the Carlist group found at the beginning of *El resplandor de la hoguera* through *Gerifaltes de antaño*, the second and third books of his *Guerra carlista* trilogy, respectively. At the beginning of *Gerifaltes*, Santa Cruz leads the Carlist charge into Otáin, a small village in Guizpúzkoa, where his forces, “[q]uemaban las puertas de las casas, apaleaban a los viejos y hacían correr a las mujeres con los niños en brazos,” (OC I 825). Over the course of the novel, Santa Cruz sentences at least nine people to death—the Marquesa of Redín, Miguelo Egoscué, and seven fugitives from Otáin—, pitilessly painting himself as a ruthless leader.<sup>5</sup>

The priest was not alone in his fight against Isabel. Several other religious figures in Valle’s trilogy likewise belligerently defend their beliefs in the name of the Carlist pretender. Two excellent examples include Roquito, a former convent sexton, who murders a liberal *centinela* and burns down a barn in an occupied village and Madre Isabel, the devout abbess from the nunnery at Viana del Prior, who begrudgingly transforms her opinion over the course of the novel questioning if, “¿[e]ra así la guerra? ¡Un olvido de la vida y del fin! ¡Un resplandor que calcina todos los pensamientos! ¡Un resoplar y un golpear de fragua que enrojece las almas y las bate como el hierro!” (OC I 758, 799). Such views on war harmonize with Valle’s own, as developed in his *La medianoche: Visión estelar de un momento de guerra*.

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<sup>5</sup> Valle’s version of the Santa Cruz’s brutality pales in comparison to Pío Baroja’s stark description:

Únicamente se distinguió por su crueldad y su fanatismo; mandó emplumar y apalear a mujeres; fusiló a una mujer embarazada en Arechavaleta; apaleó a oficiales carlistas, como al comandante Amilivia; mató a tenientes suyos, de quien estaba celoso; fusiló a veintitrés carabineros y a su teniente en Endarlaza, a pesar de haberles ofrecido cuartel, y quemó y robó la estación de Beasaín. (158)

In May of 1916, with the Western world already two years engulfed in World War I, Valle visits the French battlefield to lend his support to the Allied forces and experience the sights and sounds of war, comprehensively collecting into one textual whole a single bellicose moment. He explains his lofty goal: “quise ser centro y tener de la guerra una visión astral, fuera de geometría y de cronología, como si el alma, desencarnada ya, mirase a la tierra desde su estrella” (OC I 904). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Valle praises the value of war as evidence of the eternal struggle between civilization and barbarity, with the cyclical eventuality that the former survives the latter. “Para él,” writes Manuel Alberca, “la guerra era una manifestación más del antiguo conflicto entre culturas antagónicas, la mediterránea y la germana, la primera basada en un cristianismo fraternal civilizado, y la segunda, en la fuerza y la agresividad” (Valle 170). In chapter 33 of *La medianoche*, his account of his experience on the battlefield, Valle discloses:

La guerra tiene una arquitectura ideal, que sólo los ojos del iniciado pueden alcanzar, y así está llena de misterio telúrico y de luz. En ninguna creación de los hombres se revela mejor el sentido profundo del paisaje, y se religa mejor con los humanos destinos. Por la guerra es eterna el alma de los pueblos. La lujuria creadora se aviva por ella, como la antorcha en el viento que la quiere apagar. Sólo la amenaza de morir perpetúa las formas terrenales, sólo la muerte hace al mundo divino. (934)

Such a view of war renounces the present moment and encapsulates the conflict into mythical proportions, distilling the battle into timeworn binaries of good and evil, light and darkness, and life and death. In this vision, war abruptly reminds mankind of its fragile mortality, a frame of mind far removed from the ritual of daily life.

Madre Isabel's conclusion on battle in *Resplandor* illustrates this faulty perspective. As she realizes:

Recordaba el ardimiento de aquellos aldeanos que acechaban el paso de las tropas republicanas. Era un pueblo de cruzados que luchaba por la fe. Y, sin embargo, cuando iban a morir y a dar muerte, no entraban en sí mismos, no sentían el alma toda en temblor ante el misterio de la eterna justicia. [. . .] De aquellos aldeanos ocultos en los breñales y prontos a caer sobre el camino, nadie podría decir cuáles eran los que llevaban consigo la muerte. Estaba ya con ellos y ninguno la sentía.<sup>6</sup>  
(OC I 799)

In *La medianoche*, Valle aims to describe the effects of war on the psyche of the individual. In his mind's eye, an opportunity arises for the "iniciado" to rise above the temporal moment, assume a "visión astral" to recognize the conflict's archetypal nature and derive one's precarious mortality (934, 904). "Todo nuestro arte," comments don Estrafalario, the former cleric-turned-prophet at the beginning of Valle's *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, "nace de saber que un día pasaremos" (OC II 993). Such ideas lay the groundwork for Valle's difficult aesthetic model, as explained in his 1916 *La lámpara maravillosa*, a topic that I will consider in the second chapter.<sup>7</sup> Returning to the religious aspects of the struggle, Madre Isabel's thoughts consider the plight of devout soldiers; common folk who give up their lives without understanding the mortal toll

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<sup>6</sup> The ideas expressed in this citation resonate with developing philosophical currents during the nineteenth century, especially those proposed by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Several other writers from the generation of '98 were both familiar with and integrated these philosophers into their texts, as nominally explored in Pío Baroja's work and clearly posited in Miguel de Unamuno's writings. Valle-Inclán's uncanny usage of trending philosophical ideas in his literary texts—a usage that surprisingly and accurately predicts later concepts—will be expanded in chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Difficult in the sense that not even Valle was able to master the style. As he admits in the prologue to *La medianoche*:

Yo, torpe y vano de mí, quise ser centro y tener de la guerra una visión astral, fuera de geometría y de cronología, como si el alma, desencarnada ya, mirase a la tierra desde su estrella. He fracasado en el empeño, mi droga índica en esta ocasión me negó su efluvio maravilloso. Estas páginas que ahora salen a la luz no son más que un balbuceo del ideal soñado. (OC I 904)

exacted from warfare. In a very real sense, their religious zeal has blinded them to the danger of combat. Instead of reorienting their focus on the reality of life and death, they trust in a glorious end promised through their unrelenting faith, regardless of whether they survive the battle or not. Their approach to war is one of blind obedience. They fight simply because they are told to do so.

Perhaps the most stinging sign of obstinate religious militancy happens in *Gerifaltes de antaño* when liberal forces, under attack from Santa Cruz and his ragtag militia, find refuge in an old convent upon which the priest and his men consequently lay siege (OC I 834-35). The Carlist attackers, whose members consist of both clergy and Catholic faithful, unhesitatingly open fire on a structure built to honor and practice their professed beliefs. The scene sets up a terrible irony, betraying a form of political dedication that supersedes religious devotion. Valle shrewdly describes the events, “[e]ra todo de piedra aquel antiguo convento, y los republicanos lo tenían aspillerado. El humo de las descargas parecía inmóvil sobre los paredones, rojos por siglos” (835). Here the author evocatively extends the siege one metaphorical step further, craftily insinuating that, despite its longstanding traditions (“antiguo”) and the blood spilt on its behalf over the years (“los paredones [. . .] rojos”), the present Church finds itself rotten at its core, “aspillerado,” at its center by the liberal enemy. The exquisite imagery lends itself remarkably well to the present religious crisis at the turn of the nineteenth century. The major division of the Church, as outlined above, falls between the stodgy traditionalists (who for the most part side with the *carlistas*) and the politically cooperative *moderados*. While the former group actively fights against its present government, the latter carefully attempts to balance Christian principles with liberal politics. Under the *moderados*, the Church tries to find a middle ground between two seemingly contradictory poles, theocracy with administrative privilege on the one hand and

separation from State on the other, much like a Catholic convent pigeonholed by Republican invaders.

## V. An Incurable Clergy

The Peninsular War (1808-1814) proved to be an absolute drain on Church resources and leadership. In an effort to fund the war effort against France, the *Cortes de Cádiz* (1810-1813) approved “massive closing of religious houses and the sale of their property for the benefit of the State” (Callahan *Church* 100). Compounding its economic difficulties, Juan Álvarez Medizábal’s ensuing policies on *desamortización* divest the Church of its territories and buildings, critical sources of its financial gain, well into the 1850s. As Frances Lannon estimates, “the definitive *desamortización* was initiated by Mendizábal. Between 1836 and 1845, 83% of the property belonging to the religious orders was seized and sold, a process completed after Madoz’s legislation of 1855” (59). Amidst a shrinking economy and vanishing assets, the clergy loses leaders by the handful, some fleeing their dioceses while others simply abandon their religious posts, finally fed up with liberal reform. Those that remain either already harbor liberal sympathies or have no alternative choice but to endure, doing the best that they can to stay the course.<sup>8</sup>

Hardest hit by the sweeping reform were the parish clergies, the frequently rural and underprivileged subdivisions of the see, where financial income and political support went from minimal to, in some cases, nonexistent. Callahan describes their meager conditions:

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<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastics such as Félix Torres Amat (bishop of Astorga) and Pedro González Vallejo found gubernatorial favor due to their mostly liberal policies. “The liberal prelates,” writes Callahan, “did not necessarily accept all the measures the state imposed to reform the Church, but they represented the vestiges of the old alliance of Constitution and Altar from 1810 and 1820 between liberal politicians and reforming ecclesiastics. The reforming bishops of the 1830’s were few in number” (*Church* 164).

The average revenue of a parish priest in the diocese between 1836 and 1839 ranged from nothing to 1,300 reales in a time when a minimum clerical salary was set at 3,000. [. . .] Nearly half of the parishes of the Tarragona archdiocese lacked priests by 1840. In poor villages of the Toledo archdiocese, some clergy, deprived of any income, abandoned their parishes, leaving the population without religious services. (*Church* 165).

Adding insult to injury, the country parishes were already notoriously neglected by the Church, with ecclesiastical focus selectively applied to the more economically fruitful metropolises (e.g., Toledo, Segovia, and Madrid).<sup>9</sup> All things considered, the parish priest found himself in the unenviable position of inescapable frugality and remote leadership, trying to teach Christian principles to “an often illiterate peasantry” (Callahan *Church* 221). It comes as no surprise that many priests relegated to these rural posts swiftly become disenchanting with their religious lot, frequently resorting to suspicious—and oftentimes sacrilegious—practices. Celibacy, conviction, and ritual, three critical characteristics for ecclesiastical leadership, tend to fall to the wayside for multiple parish clergymen.

The progressive deterioration of political power coupled with the slow decline of clerical faithfulness and the unchecked practice of popular religion among the rural parishes leads to an identifiable period of crisis for the Church that spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Acutely sensitive to these signs of religious decadence, Valle incorporates characters into his writings, including Pedro Gailo from *Divinas palabras*, Padre Veritas from *Sacrilegio*, and Ádega and the unnamed pilgrim from *Flor de santidad* to demonstrate clerical concubinage, sacrilege, and superstition, key spiritual deficiencies of his era.

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<sup>9</sup> Callahan describes the parish priests as, “perennial victims of the unequal distribution of resources within the church” (*Church* 220).

## V. 1. Clerical Concubinage

In 1816, the bishop of Calahorra, according to Callahan, discovered and condemned instances of sexual impurity, drunkenness, cheating, idleness, and religious apathy among the parish priests (*Church* 116). And in 1831, the papal nuncio, Francesco Tiberi, informed the Pope that “moral irregularities were still common among the secular clergy” (Callahan *Church* 143). Further, Lannon reports that in “pre-1914 Madrid,” a young teenager encounters, “the priest he most admired in a [ . . . ] park and was introduced to his wife and son” (98). While such examples represent the minority of parish leadership, they unfortunately set a terrible precedent for the Church, which already suffers under heavy scrutiny from the liberals, and provide ample evidence to a government looking for reasons to reduce religious influence in the political sphere. Even as late as the 1920s, rural sees such as Yegen, a small village located in the Alpujarra region of Granada, according to Gerald Brenan, “were the dumping grounds for bad specimens” (70). After witnessing the elopement of the parish priest with the daughter-in-law of the local doctor, Brenan observed that the priest’s replacement, don Indalecio, another incorrigible *cura*, arrived with his housekeeper, *Pan Blanco*, with whom he had maintained an amorous relationship for years (70-71).

Following the history of the Catholic Church in Spain, clerical concubinage has occurred as early as the ninth century, when “[o]rdination of the clergy ultimately drifted far from canonical norms, and concubinage and fornication among the clergy may have been more widespread than in most parts of Western Europe” (Payne 11-12). The pestilence of priestly immorality continues into the middle ages and, in 1351, the *Cortes de Castilla* require that the

“*barrangas de clérigos* (concubines of clerics) [. . .] wear a distinctive headdress” (Payne 29).<sup>10</sup>

By the nineteenth century, concubinage becomes one of the most prevalent vices among parish priests, making don Indalecio only one example of many.

In his 1920 play, *Divinas palabras*, Valle takes clerical immorality a step further by portraying a priest, Pedro Gailo, already married to a woman, Mari-Gaila, who commits adultery with Séptimo Miau, a diabolical drifter.<sup>11</sup> Her affair sets off a tempestuous chain of events that results in her public humiliation, being dragged naked to the steps of the church where her cuckolded husband surprisingly pleads for patience and longsuffering. Unable to quench the mob’s thirst for blood, he utters in Latin the words of Christ: “Qui sine peccato est vestrum, primus in illam lapidem mittat” (OC II 593). Suddenly tranquil, the bewildering effect of these *divinas palabras* instantaneously sweeps over the townspeople. Those who moments before demanded death now slowly slink away, opting to “sellar la boca para los civiles, y aguantar mancuera” (594). Such a scene, designed by Valle at the height of his anticlerical sentiment, scornfully ridicules blind religious devotion and simultaneously demonstrates the powerful effect a parish priest still has on his flock, an effect mediated by Latin, a language already dead and undoubtedly incomprehensible to the villagers.

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<sup>10</sup> On the practice of clerical concubinage in Cataluña during the medieval period, I direct the reader to Michelle Armstrong-Partida’s insightful 2009 essay, “Priestly Marriage: The Tradition of Clerical Concubinage in the Spanish Church.”

<sup>11</sup> Of Pedro Gailo and Mari-Gaila’s marriage there can remain no doubt. As La Tatula, a minor character in *Divinas palabras*, informs us, “Mari-Gaila, [es] casada con un hermano carnal de [Juana la Reina]. Pedro de Gailo el sacristán, en sus papeles es Pedro del Reino” (OC II 535). Simoniña, their daughter (whom Pedro Gailo drunkenly and regrettably tries to rape), provides irrefutable proof of their heretical union.

While *Divinas palabras* is subtitled as a *tragicomedia de aldea*, its publication date (1920) and thematic content inevitably suggest Valle applied his *esperpento* technique; viz., in the play, he not only projects his contemporary reality, but also distorts it, creating grotesque deformations of his culture, society, and, especially present in this work, religion. By creating a married *sacristán*, he already provides an example of the rampant clerical concubinage found in his society. By having the priest’s wife subsequently commit adultery, the playwright further disparages a relationship already violating religious protocol. In a very real way, Valle deforms a deformity and, in so doing, attacks both the Church and its hypocrisy.

## V. 2. Sacrilege

Underappreciated by Church authorities even before Mendizábal's *desamortización*, the ecclesiastical cuts left villagers in rural towns such as Yegen or Viana del Prior (where the action in *Divinas palabras* takes place) to their own religious devices. By the late nineteenth and well into the early twentieth centuries, Payne observes that “the landless peasant masses were becoming increasingly alienated from formal religion,” and “a good portion of the lower middle classes were strongly anticlerical and becoming anti-Catholic” (110). Such places become hotbeds for sacrilege and superstition, as exemplified by the characters in Valle's 1927 *Auto para siluetas* titled *Sacrilegio* and described in his 1904 novel, *Flor de santidad*.<sup>12</sup>

A priest-less cave serves as the backdrop for *Sacrilegio* where, in a single blasphemous act, the bandits shave a tonsure into their accomplice Padre Veritas's scalp, effectively baptizing him as a priest.<sup>13</sup> They do so in order to provide the last rights to El Sordo de Triana, a cohort suspected of treason. Evidently raised in the Catholic faith, even the bandits cannot resist the temptation for a semi-traditional (sac)religious absolution. Mocking the Extreme Unction, El Sordo de Triana's confession, complete except for ecclesiastical pardon, ends with his untimely death after being shot in the back by the captain, who sensed that, “¡si no le sello la boca, nos gana la entraña ese tunante!” (OC II 1203).<sup>14</sup> Without priestly direction, those placed in power

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<sup>12</sup> *Sacrilegio* appears seven years after *Divinas palabras* in the same year as the publication of his final *esperpento*, *La hija del capitán*. It is important to note that the author still, even during the last decade of his life, unmistakably disparages the Church, belittling its clerics and their conduct. Another popular anecdote, especially pertinent in this section, derives from Valle's last will and testament. According to Francisco Pina, Valle “[c]onservó hasta los últimos momentos el gusto por las frases que expresaban crudamente, sin tapujos ni melindres convenencieros, su real y soberana manera de pensar y de sentir. Y dijo a los que le rodeaban en el trance de la muerte: No quiero la visita de frailecito humilde, ni de cura discreto, ni de jesuita sabihondo” (33).

<sup>13</sup> This is not the first time Valle connects a bandit with priest-like imagery. In addition to Santa Cruz, Valle also creates a short 1903 sketch titled “Un retrato,” and compares the portrait of the infamous Galician bandit, Mamed Casanova, with “un monje penitente” (OC II 1475). The criminal livelihood of Juan de Guzmán—the notorious, albeit “muy piadoso,” bandit from Valle's 1903 *Sonata de estío*—similarly belies a deep religious conviction (OC I 426).

<sup>14</sup> El Sordo's sense of unmitigated remorse after recounting his past sins demonstrates his incomplete, albeit sacrilegious, form of divine absolution: “Padre reverendo, santígueme su merced con el Divino Crucificado.

inconsiderately decide the fate of the individual. Ethically removed from the jurisdiction of the Church, the captain can choose what moral standards to uphold or suppress, as demonstrated by his ruthless homicide. Ironically, the victim, El Sordo de Triana, was allotted the opportunity to confess his sins, which he does compellingly, beginning to stir the hearts of his captors, only to abruptly meet his end. In a sense, his ‘deathbed confession’ was performed as directed by tradition, i.e., right before his death, albeit with a false priest and a premature ending.

While such a scene did not likely occur in the rural villages, long abandoned by the priest—similar to the clerically absent cave in *Sacrilegio*—, the play’s events demonstrate how deeply ingrained Catholic tradition finds itself in the hearts of Spaniards, even among a group of bandits, and the unorthodox methods that they will resort to in order to fulfill the demand of such a tradition with the single justification that to do otherwise would violate divine law. “El Señor Frasquito pide confesión,” instructs Padre Veritas, “y negarle ese pasaporte es contra Ley de Dios” (1197). Left to their own spiritual direction, the people, allegorized by the bandits in *Sacrilegio*, develop their own, frequently sacrilegious, means to attend to their spiritual needs. Such is the case in Valle’s *Flor de santidad*, where an unrepentant innkeeper superstitiously tries to remove a pilgrim’s curse from her flock of sheep.

### V. 3. Superstition

*Flor de santidad* unfolds in San Clodio, a remote parish in the heart of Galicia, where a road-weary pilgrim knocks at the door of the local inn, begging for shelter from the night. He pleads, “haced al pobre peregrino un bien de caridad,” only to receive the stern refusal, “[v]aya con Dios, hermano!” (OC I 609-10). After the door slams shut, the bitter pilgrim grabs a handful

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Consuéleme con alguna oración su reverencia. ¡Ayúdeme a lavar esta conciencia tan negra!” Between the confession and the gunshot, Padre Veritas never has a chance to fully succor El Sordo from his overwhelming guilt.

of dirt and throws it at the inn, vengefully cursing, “¡Permita Dios que una peste cierre para siempre esa casa sin caridad! ¡Que los brazados de ortigas crezcan en la puerta! ¡Que los lagartos anden por las ventanas a tomar el sol!” (610). The following day, the innkeeper counts her sheep as they leave the stable, only to stare in horror as the final and newest member of her flock collapses, dead in its tracks. “Es la maldición del peregrino, señora ama,” her shepherdess portentously relates (616). As the sheep begin dying off one by one, the innkeeper’s urgent resolve to remove the curse becomes increasingly desperate.

The pilgrim’s curse and the innkeeper’s response become the driving force of *Flor de santidad*’s narrative. The innkeeper attempts in three distinct instances to remove the curse. First, she makes a simple prayer and a promise which bring her to a *saludador*, a healer who relies heavily on superstition and folklore for his healings. Frustrated after this failed first effort, she decides to try again, taking matters into her own hands and assumes, much like Padre Veritas in *Sacrilegio*, the priestly role upon herself to exorcize the curse from her flock. Worried that her blessing will prove insufficient, she makes a third attempt and, following the directive from one of her tenants, decisively throws a lamb onto a burning pyre. Each effort provides significant evidence of the rural superstition running rampant throughout the country parishes at the turn of the century.

In her first petition, a short prayer to San Clodio, the patron saint of the village, the innkeeper promises to offer one of her best sheep at the local festival, la feria de Brandeso. So begins her journey with Ádega, the shepherdess, towards the village. While travelling, they encounter two young men, one of which tells of a “saludador,” who, “sabe palabras para deshacer toda clase de brujerías” (621). His craft, although allegedly effective, has been proscribed by the local minister, as evidenced by his timid response to the innkeeper’s pleading

for a cure: “[s]é un ensalmo, pero no puedo decirlo. El señor abade estuvo aquí y me amenazó con la paulina... ¡No puedo decirlo!” (623). The innkeeper manages to haggle one of her prize sheep in exchange for the remedy. Weighing his odds, the healer decides that the chances of the abbot returning to San Clodio, a backwater parish deep in rural Galicia, are quite slim. After some deliberation, he agrees to the deal and offers to make the balsam, “sin que lo sepa el señor abade” (623).<sup>15</sup> His directions, strange as they seem, demonstrate the local affinity for superstition and magic:

La condenación de las aguas solamente se rompe con la primera luna, a las doce de la noche. Para ello es menester llevar el ganado a que beba en fuente que tenga un roble, y que esté en una encrucijada... [ . . . ] La fuente que buscas está cerca de San Gundián, yendo por el Camino Viejo... Hace años había otras dos [ . . . ] pero una bruja secó los robles. (624)

From the oak tree, to the new moon, to the midnight hour, to the crossroads—all of the *saludador*'s comments reinforce the special attention paid to superstition and folklore amongst the townsfolk. His final insight, that the other two ponds are no longer serviceable because, “una bruja secó los robles,” further exaggerates the local belief in the supernatural.

The anxiously awaited night of the new moon eventually arrives and the innkeeper, fully confident in the miraculous healing power of the *saludador*'s counsel, leads the shepherdess and her pastoral retinue to the indicated place, a dark, quiet pond surreptitiously found behind a church. The two women mutter silent prayers as they watch each member of the flock drink from the pool. Their return to the inn marks a period of temporary relief until, three chapters later,

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<sup>15</sup> The little value that the *saludador* places on his membership in the church and by extension the welfare of his soul—i.e., he is willing to risk it in exchange for a lamb—illustrates the growing irreligiousness of the townspeople in the provincial parishes.

while completing her duties as shepherdess, Ádega looks in horror at a sheep that falls to its knees and, “quejábase con moribundo balido” (633). She rushes back to the inn, carrying the dying animal in her arms.

Since the prescribed remedy has failed, the innkeeper decides to take matters into her own hands, making a second effort to remove the pilgrim’s curse over her flock. She lifts the sick sheep and, “entró de nuevo en la cocina: [s]entada al pie del fuego repetía una y otra vez al mismo tiempo que trazaba en el testuz del cordero el círculo del Rey Salomón: ‘¡Brujas, fuera! ¡Brujas, fuera! ¡Brujas, fuera!’” (634). Her use of the Seal of Solomon hearkens back to medieval religious practices, undoubtedly prohibited by the same abbot who chided the *saludador* for his sacrilegious cures, whereas her three exclamations, “¡Brujas, fuera!” prove the innkeeper’s conviction that the curse persists through witchcraft.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after her dramatic home remedy, one of the inn’s patrons shares his own experience with animal curses: “[y]o tuve un amo a quien le embrujaron todo un rebaño” (635). When asked what his master did to cure his flock, the journeyman relates, “pues verse con quien se lo tenía embrujado y darle una carga de trigo por que lo libertase. Mi amo no sabía quién fuese, pero una saludadora le dijo que cogiera la res más enferma y la echare viva en una fogata. Aquella alma que primero acudiere al oír los balidos, aquella era...” (635). This discussion greatly affects the innkeeper who, after little thought, starts building a fire outside the inn.

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<sup>16</sup> Especially prevalent in medieval Arabic religious texts, the Seal of Solomon consists of the image (an encircled hexagram) engraved into a ring by which its wearer exorcised demons, controlled the elements, or even spoke with animals. The innkeeper most likely used the symbol for the latter purpose. For more information about the Seal of Solomon, please consult the *Jewish Encyclopedia*’s 1906 entry, “Solomon, Seal of.” Besides his fascination with the occult, Valle may have recalled Goethe’s use of “Solomon’s key” from *Faust*. Upon realizing that the dog that followed him home is in fact a dark spirit, Faust uses the key in order to capture and transform the beast from a canine into Mephistopheles: “With this hybrid half-brood of hell / king Solomon’s Key works very well” (40).

Handing the sick lamb off to her son, the innkeeper stokes the flames and, once the bonfire reaches the desired intensity, encourages him to throw the sheep into the inferno. The shepherdess helplessly watches the gruesome scene:

Ádega escuchaba conmovida el trémulo balido, que parecía subir llenando el azul de la noche, como el llanto de un niño. [. . .] Los balidos se levantaron de entre las llamas, prolongados, dolorosos, penetrantes. La vieja atizaba el fuego, y con los ojos encendidos vigilaba el camino que se desenvolvía bajo la luna, blanquecino y desierto. De pronto llamó al hijo:

“Mira allí, rapaz.”

Y le mostraba una sombra alta y desamparada que parecía haberse detenido a lo lejos. (636)

As indicated by the tenant, the first soul to respond to the lamb's braying would be the individual responsible for the curse. Moments after the sheep's untimely demise, “Ádega suspiraba sin valor para mirar hacia el camino: [s]u corazón se estremecía adivinando que era el peregrino quien llegaba” (636). To her absolute shock, she observes the pilgrim carefully making his way up the path towards the crematory fire.

The third attempt at removing the curse has catastrophic results for Ádega. While she recognizes the pilgrim as the source of the curse, she does not share the same vengeful aspirations as her master. Rather, she directly associates him with Christ, as demonstrated by her initial assertion: “[e]s la maldición del peregrino, señora ama. Aquel santo era Nuestro Señor.” She continues, “[e]ra Nuestro Señor que andaba pidiendo por las puertas para saber dónde había caridad” (616). By connecting the pilgrim with Christ, it becomes very clear why Ádega

becomes so distressed upon recognizing him as the first one to respond to the burning ewe; in so doing, he has also sealed his fate. In Ádega's eyes, God is about to die.<sup>17</sup>

## VI. The Death of God

The relationship between the pilgrim and the shepherdess develops very distinctly from his interactions with the other characters in the novel, resulting in Ádega's unwavering adulation. As discussed earlier, the innkeeper harbors purely malicious feelings for the pilgrim as a result of his terrible curse on her flock. Another group of washerwomen disparagingly identify him as a "famoso prosero," that, "llevaba ya tiempo corriendo por estos contornos" (OC I 639). Far from feeling the spite or disdain expressed by her townsfolk, Ádega admires the pilgrim religiously. At the moment of the curse, her impressions diverge completely from those of her master.

After silently observing the tired pilgrim's insensitive rejection at the inn, Ádega meekly and ingenuously invites the road-weary wayfarer to share her stable for the night. "No vaya de noche por el monte, señor," she insists, "[m]ire, el establo de las vacas lo tenemos lleno de heno y podría descansar a gusto" (610). What happens next evinces scandal, yet does not explicitly present any illicit activity. After entering the stable, the pilgrim gently grabs Ádega by the waist, gradually pulls her towards his bed of hay, and speaks with her about his long journey from Jerusalem. After a short exchange, she discovers his collection of rosaries, "tocados [. . .] en el sepulcro de Nuestro Señor" (611). He generously offers one to the shepherdess, who unbuttons her blouse, placing the sacred item as close as possible to her heart. The pilgrim sees her unclad

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche as early as 1882 famously concludes that, "God is dead," philosophically signaling the twilight of the transcendental horizon (*The Gay Science* 109, 119-20, 199). Especially significant to Spain at the end of the nineteenth century, the 'death of God' dictum unfetters incredulity and agnosticism from the heavy chains of traditional religion, allowing Spanish writers to sharply and rightfully criticize the Church, the stalwart defender of Christian belief and careful steward of metaphysical values, in its decadent state. The philosophical repercussions that the death of God has on Valle's artistic technique will be explored in the third chapter.

throat and the chapter closes leaving much to the imagination as Ádega “se desabrochaba el corpiño, y descubría la candida garganta, como una virgen mártir que se dispusiese a morir decapitada” (612). The following chapter leaps ahead, describing Ádega’s labor in the fields as she tends to her flock and a subsequent miraculous vision, but does little to illuminate what happened between her and the pilgrim in the stable on that fateful night.

Not until the end of the third *estancia*, immediately after his death (at the hands of the innkeeper and her son nonetheless), do we gain insight into what occurred between the pilgrim and Ádega. Upon learning of the homicide, Ádega flees the inn until she arrives at the village pond where servants draw water to take back to their homes. To her terrible surprise, she discovers the pilgrim’s lifeless body tossed upon the shore and begins to weep inconsolably. Two goat herders stumble across the devastated shepherdess and ask, pointing to the corpse, “¿[q]ué te acontece Ádega? [. . .] ¿Era algo tuyo?” (638). Her reply reveals both her naiveté and blasphemous communion with the pilgrim: “¡[e]ra Dios Nuestro Señor! Una noche vino a dormir conmigo en el establo: Tuvimos por cama un monte de heno. [. . .] ¡Todos lo veréis, el lindo infante que me ha de nacer! Conoceréisle porque tendrá un sol en la frente. ¡Nacido será de una pobre pastora y de Dios Nuestro Señor!” (638, 639). In no uncertain terms, Ádega directly connects the pilgrim with God and her unborn child with His son.

The text itself does little to dissuade the reader from the shepherdess’s conviction. It presents differing interpretations of the pilgrim, as exemplified by both the innkeeper and the townspeople, but at no point does it clearly deny Ádega’s divine assumptions.<sup>18</sup> Even at the end

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<sup>18</sup> Further, Dru Dougherty, in his *Palimpsestos al cubo: Prácticas discursivas de Valle-Inclán*, offers three possible interpretations of the pilgrim: “[e]l hombre que deja embarazada a Ádega es, según el lenguaje usado para describirle, un ‘peregrino’ en quien Dios se personifica (discurso cristiano), un ‘mendicante’ sin vergüenza que abusa de la ingenuidad de la pastora (discurso realista) y un brujo cuyos poderes mágicos se dirigen contra los venteros al echar una maldición sobre su rebaño (discurso pagano)” (71). In the end, no single interpretation trumps the others. As Dougherty explains, “el peregrino *es efectivamente* todo lo que cuenta esta historia: un mendicante

of the novel, after the shepherdess has undergone the arduous process of exorcism and spiritual healing during the midnight mass offered at the church of Santa Baya (another instance of superstitious belief), Ádega remains pregnant and, among the ringing of the ancient bells of the convent, the novel closes with the words: “Laus Deo” (667). From the death of God—the pilgrim’s murder performed in the dead of night—the text concludes with the promise of birth—Ádega’s swelling womb, easily perceived in “la luz de la mañana” (666).

The death of God, a concept introduced by Romanticism but more popularly exemplified philosophically by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*) and later *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), becomes a standard-bearing phrase of the 1850s.<sup>19</sup> As Matei Calinescu carefully points out, “starting some time toward the middle of the nineteenth century[, this] phrase reaffirms the death of God—until the expression becomes in our century a sort of cliché—but it is mainly concerned with exploring the consequences of God’s unthinkable yet already banal demise” (62). What consequences can we associate with the demise of divinity? Evident from *Flor de Santidad*, a peculiar cycle of death and birth becomes possible, much like the movement from darkness to light.<sup>20</sup> The circularity implied by this example reinforces Valle’s own aesthetic style, which draws from cyclical time and Gnosticism.

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sucio y desgredado, un peregrino que resucita la devoción del tiempo antiguo, y también un primitivo de Dios Padre que posee a su hija, dejándola—como la novela de Valle—fecundada, llena de promesa” (79).

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the romantic origins of the death of God theme, Octavio Paz, as early as 1974, infers that, El tema de la muerte de Dios es un tema romántico [. . .que abre] las puertas de la contingencia y la sinrazón. La respuesta es doble: la ironía, el humor, la paradoja intelectual; también la angustia, la paradoja poética, la imagen. Ambas actitudes aparecen en todos los románticos: su predilección por lo grotesco, lo horrible, lo extraño, lo sublime irregular, la estética de los contrastes, la alianza entre risa y llanto, prosa y poesía, incredulidad y fideísmo, los cambio súbitos, las cabriolas, todo, en fin, lo que convierte a cada poeta romántico en un Ícaro, un satanás y un payaso, no es sino respuesta al absurdo: angustia e ironía” (*Los hijos* 73-74).

<sup>20</sup> Long before Nietzsche begins developing his notion of eternal recurrence with the publication of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* in 1882, Giambattista Vico proposes in his 1725 *Scienza Nuova* that our historical experiences, contrary to linear and, as will be explained, Christian time, occur in a peculiarly circular fashion. In a process he comes to label as “corsi e ricorsi,” Vico posits that history consists of three cycles (*corsi*): the creative/divine, the heroic, and the human, all of which lead into a period of “rebarbarización,” an effective return (*ricorso*) to the creative stage (Marías 265).

## VI. 1. Cyclical Time

Breaking from the utopic formula that stems from Christian ideology and its notions of irreversible time and progression towards perfection, Valle recognizes that the values of the Church in Spain have eroded, effectively resulting in its present, decadent formation. In Spain, the mechanism for achieving the Christian dream of eternal paradise has grinded to a halt, no longer able to move forward. Such a scene duly presages the absence of morality. “El problema societario,” bemoans Valle in 1911, “es esencialmente *moral*” (*Entrevistas* 86). The very institution revered for centuries as the stalwart paragon of Christian virtue has devolved into a politically inept, morally corrupt, and overly superstitious system that now only slides backwards, distancing itself more and more from its lofty ideal. In this regard, the Church swiftly approaches the end of its religious lifespan, ripe now for reformation.

This reformative movement, from decay to regeneration, death throes to vitality, approaches the model established in *Flor de santidad*, but only in part; to complete the cycle, God, or in the case of Spain, the Church, needs to die—not only suffer—and a new belief system must take its place. Such a model escapes the creative capability of Christianity, a religion based principally on decadence in the present and ultimately on personal salvation for eternity. As Octavio Paz surmises, “Cristo vino a la tierra sólo una vez. El mundo en que se propagó el cristianismo estaba poseído por el sentimiento de su irremediable decadencia y los hombres tenían la convicción de que vivían el fin de un ciclo [. . .] el próximo fin del mundo (32-33). This terminal focus leads Paz to pronounce that, “el tiempo cristiano fue finito y personal,” juxtaposing it with pagan time which “era infinito e impersonal” (33). Essentially, Christianity takes into account only half of what Valle includes in his *Flor de santidad*. Instead of imitating the primordial cycle of death and birth, Christianity follows a single line of decadence,

culminating in death, and proposes that persons will experience a single resurrection, a type of rebirth, like their savior, Christ himself. After this point, resurrected Christians are promised eternal life—an unchanging state of perfection in utopic stasis. In a very real sense, eternal life represents fulfillment of the utopia, a finitely frozen form of existence. By distancing himself from Christianity's utopic and therefore finite formula, Valle also reaches to the pagan past—even its ancient past—to trace the cycle of death and birth.

According to Octavio Paz, primitive peoples believe in a notion of circular time that begins with a primordial moment, a perfect past, which then progresses chronologically and eventually experiences its own decadence, leading inevitably towards its demise and subsequent regeneration in a cycle that repeats infinitely. He writes:

El pasado se anima, es la semilla primordial que germina, crece, se agota y muere—para renacer de nuevo. [. . .] La historia es una degradación del tiempo original, un lento pero inexorable proceso de decadencia que culmina en la muerte. El remedio contra el cambio y la extinción es la recurrencia: el pasado es un tiempo que reaparece y que nos espera al fin de cada ciclo. El pasado es una edad venidera. Así, el futuro nos ofrece una doble imagen: es el fin de los tiempos y es su recomienzo, es la degradación del pasado arquetípico y es su resurrección. El fin del ciclo es la restauración del pasado original—y el comienzo de la inevitable degradación” (29).

For the ancients, time is cyclical—it follows the natural circular pattern, easily perceivable in the oscillating seasons, in the planting of seeds, and in dusk and dawn. Valle, an author devoted to an idealized past, as explored above by his fascination with Carlism, finds redemptive potential in cyclical time.

Ángel Loureiro, in his 1999 article, “Valle-Inclán: La modernidad como ruina,” describes Valle’s fictitious worlds as constructions based on a lost reality. They draw from an ideal past that can never be repeated; a past so incompatible with the present that it can only be portrayed as ruin. He writes:

Todos los mundos de Valle-Inclán aparecen como ruina o degradación de una forma de vida modélica pero periclitada o en trance de desaparecer: ruinas del palacio de Brandeso y del pazo de Montenegro; “deformación grotesca” de Madrid o del campo sin mayorazgo en *Divinas palabras*. Esa percepción ruinososa de la realidad, de una realidad que Valle-Inclán sólo puede concebir como pérdida, es tal porque siempre se la compara con una posible plenitud que o aparece como irremediabilmente pasada o sólo se deja entrever como una figura fantasmática fuera del alcance del presente. (301)

This interpretation presupposes a Christian and therefore terminal and unrepeatable version of time.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, the bygone era of *hidalgos*, so highly esteemed in Valle’s *La guerra carlista* trilogy, becomes irredeemably lost to him, a waning, singular memory sinking into the historical horizon. In *Flor de santidad*, however, Valle works with a cyclical, not a Christian, temporal model. In his narrative, time both marches forward yet also leaves the promise of continuity and regeneration; in his world, the past repeats itself.<sup>22</sup> Through the curious use of Christian metaphors, imagery, and figures, Valle creates a circular version of time,

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<sup>21</sup> As Adrián G. Montoro observes, “el cristianismo no es una religión de ‘eterno retorno’ y la Encarnación, para el cristiano ortodoxo, no es repetible en el sentido en que pueden serlo los actos creadores o redentores de los dioses y héroes paganos” (265).

<sup>22</sup> It may be speculation to assume that Valle sought to restore feudalism and aristocratic privilege by rendering a new temporal cycle in his fiction, but the promise of restoration, ensured by circular continuity, would also necessarily imply a renewal of Spain’s *hidalgo* past, something Valle undeniably longed for at various times in his work.

one that ironically defies Christianity by depicting the death of an imperfect Christ only to lead to the birth of his son.

Following the pilgrim's demise, Ádega's unborn child will restore the cycle to its beginning, signaled by the "sol" that he carries on his forehead, a rather obvious allusion to the sunrise or, to continue with the previously established metaphor, *sonrise*; her son becomes another religious symbol of birth and cyclical continuity. Ádega, in the novel's final *estancia*, receives a vision at dusk that beautifully illustrates the connection between sun and son:

Sentada en el jardín señorial bajo las sombras seculares, suspiraba viendo morir la tarde, breve tarde azul llena de santidad y de fragancia. Sentía pasar sobre su rostro el aliento encendido del milagro y el milagro acaeció. Al inclinarse para beber en la fuente, que corría escondida por el laberinto de arrayanes, las violetas de sus ojos vieron en el cristal del agua, donde temblaba el sol poniente, aparecerse el rostro de un niño que sonreía. Era aquella aparición un santo presagio: Ádega sintió correr la leche por sus senos, y sintió la voz saludadora del que era hijo de Dios Nuestro Señor. (OC I 660)

From the still waters of the pond, Ádega perceives the reflection of a child's face. God has died and his sun, in grim metaphorical fashion, has set. From the dark horizon rises another, a smiling new son to replace his father, a fresh sun to give light to the world; the cycle continues circularly, death to birth, sunset to sunrise.

## VI. 2. Gnosticism

Valle makes abundant use of Christian imagery in order to develop his own aesthetic ideas. As demonstrated in *Flor de santidad*, he presents an imperfect Christ: an ultimately

immoral character prone to anger and swift to condemn. One could feasibly argue that Valle no longer practices Catholicism, having so heavily critiqued its central divine figure in his 1904 text. What we must emphasize, however, is not Valle's Christian fervor nor his lack thereof, but rather his unrelenting critique of the Church in its present state. In his vision, Christ is immoral because the faith he represents no longer reflects the values—morality, honesty, integrity—from which it rose. In short, Valle's version of Christ in *Flor de santidad* is a product of his times that grotesquely mirrors the insufficiencies of Spanish Catholicism at the turn of the century; he, like the religion that bears his name, has decayed into perfidy.

Central to gnostic belief is the idea of the demiurge, an imperfect form of divinity from which all creation surges. "Gnostics," writes Bertrand Russell, "held that the sensible world had been created by an inferior deity" (324). The imperfect world, replete with strife, decay, and inane humanity must naturally proceed from an imperfect creator; i.e., it reflects the deficient qualities of its designer. When connected allegorically with the demiurge, the pilgrim, a flawed Christ figure, becomes a symbol for all of creation.<sup>23</sup> His death, by extension, serves a dual function: it marks the end of one religious era, overrun by decadent morals and decaying values, and sets the stage for cyclical renewal, as promised by Ádega's unborn child. Gnosticism, as modeled by Valle's usage of a demiurge-like character, spreads its esoteric roots throughout all of his writings.

In his 1994 essay concerning *La medianoche*, "The Gnostic Flight of Valle-Inclán," Robert Lima infers that Valle drew largely from Hermes Trismegistus's *Corpus Hermetica* for

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<sup>23</sup> Bertrand Russell explains that the Gnostics, "taught that Jesus was a mere man, and that the Son of God [the perfect God, not the demiurge] descended upon him at the baptism, and abandoned him at the time of the Passion. [ . . . ] The Gnostics considered it unworthy of the Son of God to be born, to be an infant, and, above all, to die on the cross; they said that these things had befallen the man Jesus, but not the divine Son of God" (325). Such a docetic view of Christ, a mere man who the Jews crucify, coincides with Valle's portrayal of the pilgrim, an imperfect penitent who the innkeepers murder.

his gnostic insights.<sup>24</sup> “The arcane knowledge [Valle] sought,” writes Lima, “was propounded in the *Corpus Hermetica*, whose tenets were associated with the revelations of Hermes Trismegistus” (244). Trismegistus, himself a mythic figure characterized by both Hermes, the Greek god known mainly for his role as divine emissary, and Thoth, the Egyptian deity primarily credited for the development of science, religion, and philosophy, recounts in his *Hermetica* the origin of the earth, the completion and regeneration of temporal cycles, and the dissolving process of human mortality.<sup>25</sup>

In the first treatise, Trismegistus encounters Poimandres, “an enormous being completely unbounded in size,” who relates to him the creation of the world, comparing the word of god to light, a creative force that couples with the, “craftsman-mind,” to produce the earth, water, and all living things upon the face of the earth (1-3). In the third discourse, Trismegistus directly connects natural circularity—the pattern of the seasons, of the day and of the night—with the “course of the cycling gods,” affirming that “what is diminished will be renewed by necessity and by the renewal that comes from the gods and by the course of nature’s measured cycle” (14). Finally, in the eleventh lecture, he reinforces the traditional Christian definition of birth as the joining of soul and body, but reorients the idea of death as one of destruction to one of dissolution. Referring to the soul-body pairing, he writes, “[d]eath is not the destruction of things that have been combined but the dissolution of their union. They say that change is death

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<sup>24</sup> While Gnosticism and Hermetism share many beliefs, they should not be classified as a single religious category. To do so would be to make the same mistake theologians and Christian polemicists made in the second century by consolidating the separate traditions into one heretical whole. While the similarities far outweigh the differences, some irregularities remain, sufficient to distinguish one group from the other. For the purposes of this investigation, Valle did not distinguish between either system of beliefs, but rather drew from their common teachings (e.g., the demiurge, the cyclical nature of creation, and the immortality of the soul) to distance himself from the decaying religious practices of his day.

<sup>25</sup> On pages xiv-xvi of the Introduction to his translation of the *Hermetica*, Brian P. Copenhaver traces the historical development and eventual conflation of the Greek and Egyptian gods that gave rise to Hermes Trismegistus. Of course, like several ‘authors’ in the Bible (e.g., the Psalmist), Trismegistus serves as a pseudonym for many writers, all of whom compiled their work into a single spiritual compendium, the *Hermetica*.

because the body is dissolved and life passes on to the unseen” (40). While the body decays and dissolves, the immortal soul, “becomes wholly mind after getting free of the body” (34). The mind then awaits a fresh start to inhabit a new body for “[i]n dissolving all things, the cosmos renews them” (28).<sup>26</sup> Not to be underestimated, the spinning of the universe, the spiral-like quality of dissolution and renewal, marks the nature of all things caught up in the process of decay and rebirth.

The principal purpose of Gnosticism is to obtain hidden knowledge. “The term ‘knowledge,’” writes Karen L. King, “is translated from the Greek word *gnosis*” (7). By increasing in knowledge, one comes to understand and comprehend one’s position in the universe, a soul cast into a mortal coil, and yearns for salvation by returning to the God responsible for its creation. Roelof van de Broek summarizes, “[t]he salvation of the soul consists in its deliverance from the bonds of the body and its return to its divine origin” (6). Inhibited at birth, the soul becomes, “incarcerated in the body,” unable to move beyond its own mortality and instinctive physical needs (Van den Broek 9). Only through a careful and patient

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, when considering things from an eternal perspective, ideas such as ‘renewal’ and ‘regeneration’ carry ambiguous meanings, precisely due to the immortal nature of the object under consideration. When no definable beginning can be determined, what, specifically, do we return to? It becomes especially difficult to assert the origin, i.e., the point of renewal, for mankind when we cannot ascertain exactly where, when, or how it originated.

A similar conundrum arises when attempting to reconcile cyclical birth with salvation, i.e., eternal life in God’s presence. As will be explained, Gnosticism goes hand-in-hand with—and in some cults, extensively mimics—Christian ideas. It works with two unique temporal models, primordial (and therefore cyclical) and Christian (and subsequently finite) that, as Octavio Paz elucidates in his *Los hijos del limo*, are hardly compatible. While problematic, this dilemma acknowledges Gnosticism’s own fractal nature; it is the result of preferential clumping, a grouping of ‘heresies,’ that, for whatever reason, became excluded from the traditional Christian canon. Unique in their approach yet very similar in their religious framework, some of the beliefs that fit under the umbrella of Gnosticism use primordial time as a central tenet whereas others solely operate under a Christian temporal standard. When shelved together under the term ‘Gnosticism,’ these contradictory ideas resist conflation and create a paradox: how can Gnosticism believe in cyclical rebirth *as well as* eternal salvation? The answer, while it does not directly respond to the question, has to do with the very nature of Gnosticism itself. As a composite category, its parts do not make up a comprehensive whole; its beliefs at times coincide and at others diverge immensely. Such is the case for reaching an understanding of Gnosticism’s approach to cyclical rebirth, an idea it both approves and denies, depending on which tenets one observes.

process of meditation and contemplation does one grow in knowledge, making slow progress towards salvation.

In his 1917 text, *La lámpara maravillosa*, Valle recognizes and elaborates on these two models for gaining knowledge. “La Meditación,” he writes, “es aquel enlace de razonamientos por donde se llega a una verdad, y la Contemplación es la misma verdad deducida cuando se hace sustancia nuestra, olvidado el camino que enlaza razones a razones y pensamientos a pensamientos” (OC I 1907). The two steps proceed one after the other, the former preceding the latter. Valle sought to bypass the first step, “a gozar de la belleza del mundo intuitivamente,” approaching all things contemplatively, thereby achieving, “una manera absoluta de conocer, una intuición amable, deleitosa y quieta, por donde el alma goza de la belleza del mundo, privada del discurso y en divina tiniebla” (1907). In his text, Valle remembers several moments of intense contemplation and subsequent gnostic revelation. One such instance stands out as significant, due to its location: the cathedral in León.

Amidst the tall columns and vaulted ceiling of the cathedral, Valle becomes lost in memory, burying himself in sweet recollections and distant scenes from his childhood. He entered the religious edifice to escape the ideological tension surrounding him, as he explains, “[h]abía entrado buscando un refugio, agitado por el tumulto angustioso de las ideas” (OC I 1913). His quest to secure comfort by resorting to a traditional location of sanctuary, however, intriguingly results in a gnostic, even mystic, communion.<sup>27</sup> He relates:

[. . .] de pronto mi pensamiento quedó como clavado en un dolor quieto y único.  
La luz en las vidrieras celestiales tenía la fragancia de las rosas, y mi alma fue  
toda en aquella gracia como en un huerto sagrado. El dolor de vivir me llenó de

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<sup>27</sup> The right of sanctuary, or asylum, was practiced by the Church between the fourth and seventeenth centuries AD, offering individuals safety from legal, ethical, and political persecution while on church grounds.

ternura, y era mi humana conciencia llena de un amoroso bien difundido en las rosas maravillosas de los vitrales, donde ardía el sol. Amé la luz como la esencia de mí mismo, las horas dejaron de ser sustancia eternamente transformada por la intuición carnal de los sentidos, y bajo el arco de la otra vida, despojado de la conciencia humana, penetré cubierto con la luz de éxtasis. (1913)

It is especially significant that Valle dwells on his recollections, even his cherished memories to enter into his spiritual trance. “Yo vagaba en la sombra de aquellas bóvedas,” he recalls, “con el alma cubierta de lejanas memorias” (1913). Spain’s aristocratic past held a dear place in Valle’s heart and he frequently laments in his texts (as already exemplified by the marqués de Bradomín) the absence of *hidalguía* in conjunction with the insufficiencies of the Church during his era. By fixating his mind to the past—the mythic, noble past he so favored—he experiences a transformation wherein time slows to a standstill and light—the glorious, blazing light of the sun—becomes all he can sense.

The appearance of the sun, as considered in the present chapter, obviously indicates enlightenment, i.e., the appropriation of gnosis, but also signals a new beginning, a sunrise. And, according to Hermes Trismegistus, it is through the rays of the sun whereby all things are made: “[i]n this way are all things crafted. The sun [. . .] enlivens and awakens, with becoming and change, the things that live in these regions of the cosmos. It brings transmutation and transformation among them, as in a spiral, when change turns one thing to another, from kind to kind, from form to form, crafting them just as it does the great bodies” (59). Gnosticism supplies a powerful formula for Valle to develop his literary aesthetic. As he searches for an origin outside the bounds of traditional Christianity, he not only discovers a path to restoration through an allegedly heretical belief, but also a means of creation for, as Trismegistus relates, “the father

of all is god; their craftsman is the sun; and the cosmos is the instrument of craftsmanship” (61). It comes as no wonder that Valle connects his pilgrim, an imperfect Christ figure, with dusk and his son, who carries a “sol” on his forehead, with dawn. The pilgrim’s death represents, by extension, the final breath of a decaying religion. The birth of his son promises renewed vitality to Christian belief. “Hay que resucitar a Cristo,” prophetically mutters Max Estrella in *Luces de Bohemia*, presaging the arrival not of Christ, but his son (OC II 884).

Gnosticism lends itself well to Valle’s fraying religious sentiment. It forms an alternative system of belief to Spanish Catholicism which, at the turn of the century, has grotesquely become a dilapidated and dysfunctional religion overrun with political mishaps and incorrigible clerics. It behooves Valle to discover a religion that retains a sense of original Christianity yet presents a recognizable difference from the flawed religious practices of his day. Gnosticism, as early as the first century, was capriciously categorized by polemicists as heretical to mainstream Christianity, not because it necessarily digressed from traditional Christian beliefs and practices, but rather for the simple fact that they refused to include it into their sacred canon.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, a large part of gnostic (and therefore heretical) doctrine coincides remarkably well with traditional Christian teachings. Indeed, several noteworthy biblical prophets, Adam, Noah, even Christ himself, play pivotal roles in Gnostic scripture.<sup>29</sup> Valle’s interest in Gnosticism stems from the inadequacies he perceives in Spanish Catholicism. In his search for religious renewal, he retreats to the origin of Christianity, the point of separation between traditional belief and heresy, and pursues the esoteric path of gnosis.

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<sup>28</sup> Karen L. King provides a careful summary of the early association of Gnosticism with heresy in her text, *What is Gnosticism?* Consult her chapter “Gnosticism as Heresy,” especially the section, “Heresy” (pp. 23-38), for further insight.

<sup>29</sup> For a brief description of the functions of each of these prophets in gnostic scripture, I refer the reader to pages 135-36 (a summary of the Revelation of Adam and his apocalypse), 134-35 (pay special attention to the prophetic role of Adam’s son, Norea, and Noah’s wife), and 148-50 (particularly the subsection “The figure of Christ in Gnosis”), respectively, of Kurt Rudolph’s *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism*.

## VII. An Accelerated Demise

Valle's forlorn dream to restore aristocratic privilege results in nothing but failure for the Galician writer. Hindered by the insurmountable incompatibilities of his time with Spain's noble past, reflected only in part by the comprehensive political and moral decay of the Church, Valle's project apprehensively converts into an impossible task. Some of his earliest writings already foreshadow this irredeemably decadent perspective by presenting *hidalgos* such as El marqués de Bradomín and don Juan Manuel de Montenegro, especially significant for their quixotic roles in Valle's series of *Sonatas*, as figures thrown temporally outside of their era that still fight for an irretrievable past.<sup>30</sup> Consider, for example, the role of the marqués in the first book of Valle's *Guerra carlista* trilogy. He endeavors to sell his entire estate and donate all its proceeds to further the Carlist cause, a movement that aims to reinstate regional autonomy through the restoration of aristocratic *fueros*. After three lost wars, the Carlists eventually split apart and sputter out, leaving the memory of what could have been—a tantalizingly cruel reminder of the noble gentry—amidst the ruinous remains of a failed effort.

The impact of this failure affects Valle in two ways: first, he comes to the realization that Carlism was, unfortunately for him, the final struggle for feudalism in Spain, a project that he supports even as it lay dying; second, he concludes that traditional political and religious efforts cannot restore aristocratic privilege. Facing such an impasse, any right-minded individual would throw her arms up in surrender, admitting defeat. Not so for Valle. His determination to press forward, despite the futility of his efforts, provides the first clue as to why he writes his *esperpentos*: they recalibrate societal focus, inserting traditional, and therefore ideal, protagonists

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<sup>30</sup> The peculiar similarity between Valle's longing for Spain's *hidalgo* past and don Quijote's passion for the world of the chivalric romance cannot go unnoticed. Both figures lovingly hold dear a past, irredeemable style of life and strive, the latter more stridently than the former, to reclaim that memory. Please consult my Introduction for a more in-depth study of their similarities and differences.

into modern contexts. Why? Valle does so in order to demonstrate their incompatibility with present society. He reimagines their literary circumstances in order to prove that even they cannot survive the gruesome reality of modern Spanish incivility. As Max Estrella encapsulates, “España es una deformación grotesca de la civilización europea” (OC II 933). A civilization whose literature, I would add, already falls under the spell of decadence and foreboding, easily perceived in Charles Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mau* or Paul Verlaine’s symbolist poetry.

Valle’s aesthetic technique occupies similar veins of thought as the decadent and *fin-de-siècle* poets. His comprehensively degrading portrayal of Spanish citizenry from the upper to the lower classes paints an image of grotesque barbarity and moral decay. What cannot be forgotten, however, is that Valle has a purpose to his harsh societal critique: he believes in cyclical redemption and attacks the already unsteady religious and political regimes that supposedly uphold tradition and morality in order to accelerate their demise. Like Christ in the New Testament, Valle’s technique “come[s] not to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34). By unscrupulously smashing the moral foundation on which society functions, he is, in a sense, forcing a sunset. His goal is to return to what came before, to restore honor to tradition, and, as signaled by Max Estrella, to resurrect Christ. In order to live again, however, Christ must die. As Valle writes in the 1903 preface to his *Corte de amor*, “[e]n el arte como en la vida, destruir es crear” (191). The twilight of the death of God, from Valle’s perspective, becomes an iconoclastic call to arms.

The following chapter recounts the aesthetic trajectory of Valle-Inclán, moving through his *Sonatas* up until his later *esperpentos*. From his early modernist forms, I trace the development of his technique as he explores the expressive limits of modernism, pushing the boundaries of experimentation and cynicism until he ultimately arrives at an artistic

impasse—either imitate the hollow pantomime of testimonial theater especially prevalent in Echegaray and Benavente, mimicking its societal pretense and cultural malaise or, as he ventures to do, acerbically assault the stilted framework of a corrupt society in moral crisis. Max Estrella becomes an archetypal figure for the artist in Spain: a blind, starving, and luckless soul whose only friend swindles him of his last *peseta*, leaving him to suffer an ignominious death in the freezing cold of a pitiless Madrid night. Hints of such desperation and foreboding can be found in the protagonist of Valle's *Sonatas*, El marqués de Bradomín. The same figure that staunchly defends traditional ideals in Valle's *Guerra Carlista* trilogy reminisces some five years earlier on a life lived without regrets, on his adventures and mishaps as a “don Juan admirable,” that, to his misfortune, “era feo, católico y sentimental” (OC I 326).

## Chapter 2 - Past Prowess, Present Impairment: Disfiguring the Don Juan Myth

Aunque no lo confesase, y acaso sin saberlo, era feliz con esa felicidad indefinible que da el poder amar a todas las mujeres. Sin ser un donjuanista, he vivido una juventud amorosa y apasionada; pero de amor juvenil y bullente, de pasión equilibrada y sanguínea. Los decadentismos de la generación nueva no los he sentido jamás; todavía hoy, después de haber pecado tanto, tengo las mañanas triunfantes.

-Valle-Inclán "La niña Chole" (OC I 49)

### I. Deforming the Archetype

In a July 1913 interview, Ramón del Valle-Inclán reflects on Spain's Golden Age, its artistically vibrant and politically expansive sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and concludes that its burgeoning prestige was, in large part, due to an overwhelming creative impulse that gave birth to convents, religious orders, estates, and noble lineages, ultimately leaving an identifiably Spanish mark on the passage of time. Associating this creative context with his present, he concludes that every individual action one makes has eternal consequences; its effects ripple through time, inspiring, colluding, and developing into events as trivial as the birth of an insect and as far-reaching as the end of British colonialism in India.<sup>1</sup> Indubitably setting out on the same pattern of thought that meanders throughout his 1916 *Lámpara maravillosa*, Valle's attitude of cosmic connection and eternal significance underscores a central purpose of his artistic creations—by reaching into Spain's past for archetypal figures, he traces their progression through time, a journey that ends at the doorstep of his present society. In effect, Valle's final aesthetic technique, the *esperpento*, projects these characters onto the backdrop of Hispanic culture at the turn of the century—a morally bereft, religiously inept, and artistically

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<sup>1</sup> Valle feels that he himself instigated the possibility of Indian independence by forging a letter on part of Anita Delgado to the Maharajah of Kapurtala, a message that he attributes to their subsequent marriage and the birth of their son, a prince that, "puede un día llegar a ser un rey. ¡Quién sabe si ese rey," writes Valle, "es el llamado a terminar la dominación de los ingleses en la India!" (*Entrevistas* 128).

insensitive period for Spain.<sup>2</sup> What interests me in this chapter is *how* these figures got to this point; I argue that from aesthetically formulaic beginnings—e.g., a modern character coincides with basic tenets of modernist aesthetic—, their development as literary figures takes an esperpentic turn, contrasting society’s present values with the traits personified through the characters themselves. For instance, Valle’s 1921 *esperpento*, *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, fuses don Friolera, its hapless yet blindly obedient protagonist, with the character of Othello, Shakespeare’s overly suspicious, hidebound Moorish general. By projecting rigidly honorable figures onto the backdrop of Madrid in the 1920s, Valle exacerbates the amoral qualities of his own society; the juxtaposition between values celebrated by his protagonist yet ignored by his own people confirms one of Valle’s key assumptions about Spain at the turn of the century: there is nothing left worth saving.

Even as classical models cannot survive Valle’s unscrupulous present, neither can artists (e.g., Max Estrella), war veterans (such as Juanito Ventolera in *La hija del capitán*), or unassuming wives (exemplified by doña Loreta, Friolera’s spouse). As a pertinent, more primary example, I will consider Valle’s archetypal don Juan figure, El marqués de Bradomín, and follow his evolution in Valle’s work, from his first appearance in the *Sonatas* through his portrayal in *El marqués de Bradomín* and the *Guerra carlista* trilogy, culminating in his final manifestation in *Luces de Bohemia*. The marqués’s evolution demonstrates an intriguing progression in Valle’s thought. Initially represented as a prominent member of a dying nobility (as anticipated by Valle’s early Carlist inclinations), Bradomín grows more hardened over time, becoming

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<sup>2</sup> Valle himself satirizes on multiple occasions the aesthetic insensitivity of the Spanish public. In discussing its appreciation for theater, he bemoans, “[e]l autor dramático con capacidad y honradez literaria hoy lucha con dificultades insuperables, y la mayor de todas es el mal gusto del público. Un público inculto tiene la posibilidad de educarse, y esa es la misión del artista. Pero un público corrompido con el melodrama y la comedia ñoña es cosa perdida” (*Entrevistas* 146).

increasingly introspective and nostalgic in his multiple appearances. While Valle's initial attempt in the *Sonatas* sophomorically aims to present another, more mature, don Juan, his final characterization of Bradomín, in *Luces de Bohemia*, exhibits an exhausted figure far removed from the don Juan tradition, a failed philanderer whose only recourse to his previous lifestyle is through memory. Such a representation follows the same logic of his *esperpentos*, i.e., the degradation of a classical model. Through the literary development of the marqués de Bradomín, we can follow Valle's own aesthetic trajectory, from a fundamentally Romantic form in his *Sonatas*, he descends into the *esperpento*. In order to evaluate the definitive characteristics that compose the don Juan persona—and thereby determine the historical synthesis of the marqués—, we must trace his development as a *figurón* in Hispanic drama, beginning with the classical model of *El Burlador de Sevilla*.

## II. The Original Don Juan

Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* is accepted by most scholars as the first dramatic appearance of don Juan.<sup>3</sup> Successful seductions, improbable escapes, and deft deceits all characterize the infamous *burlador*'s actions on stage. It is not until he decides to fulfill his word by clutching the hand of his stone guest, the animated statue of don Gonzalo, that don Juan's amorous escapades come to an end. It is here that he pays the ultimate price for his misdeeds, fulfilling the ominous words of his chiseled captor: "quien tal hace, que tal pague"

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<sup>3</sup> Some recent studies cast doubt on the accepted authorship of *El burlador de Sevilla*. Alfredo Rodríguez López-Vázquez, in 1989, reiterates Francisco Rico's assertion that, "lo único seguro es que Tirso no la escribió" (13). Whereas traditional criticism has generally accepted Tirso as the author of the play, Rodríguez López-Vázquez, deduces that Andrés de Claramonte wrote *El burlador* (Parr 138). Leo Weinstein provides a comprehensive, albeit dated, list of texts referring to the origins of the don Juan legend, ranging from an 1896 Italian article from A. Farinelli, "Don Giovanni: note critiche," to a 1911 critical volume published in French by Gendarme de Bévotte. See his second footnote for more information (6). For a more comprehensive explanation of the authorial question of *El burlador de Sevilla*, I direct the reader to James A. Parr's "El burlador de Sevilla: Authorship and Authenticity" in his *Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Related Subjects* (138-59).

(363). An underlying message of inescapable moral responsibility permeates the work, underscored by don Gonzalo's utterance: he who conspires, colludes in, and carries out evil acts will be likewise compensated. Despite don Juan's exceptional ability to elude his pursuers, as evidenced throughout the play, his actions demand severe consequences and, in a final, supernatural act, he is punished at the hands of the reincarnated father of doña Ana. Don Juan's punishment, while clearly deserved, also serves as a severe warning for anyone found in violation of the *Siglo de Oro's* incumbent societal principles.

Golden Age Spain, a time renowned for its strict code of honor, as alluded to in numerous *comedias*, continually fails to uphold the same code its dramatic works eulogize. Felipe IV's extramarital adventures are well-known—"[e]l rey Felipe IV era muy frívolo," writes Gregorio Marañón, "también un poco don Juan"—and his society fares no better—"la inmoralidad de la Corte de Felipe IV y de Isabel de Borbón sólo podría compararse con la de las ciudades bíblicas que merecieron el fuego de Dios" (363; 354).<sup>4</sup> The very fact that these plays garnered so much public attention insinuates that their high-minded characters were admired in large part for their exceptional adherence to a venerated yet impractical code of honor, i.e., they became paragons of virtue for people who, very literally, were living iniquitous lifestyles.<sup>5</sup> Tirso's play, however,

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<sup>4</sup> On Felipe IV's bastard progeny, Martin Hume, in 1907, claims that the king sired, "thirty and more illegitimate children, of whom eight were recognized" (207). A more recent study (1988) by R. A. Stradling disputes this figure, calling it a "baseless exaggeration of an already absurd legend," and counters that, "in contrast to the twenty fitzroys customarily present in published accounts, no more than five can be attested from contemporary sources" (330).

<sup>5</sup> Lope de Vega, in his 1609 guide for creating *tragicomedias*, *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias* (written in verse, nonetheless), alludes to this type of public enthusiasm for integrally noble figures:

[. . .] si acaso un recitante  
hace un traidor, es tan odioso a todos  
que lo que va a comprar no se lo venden,  
y huye el vulgo de él cuando le encuentra;  
y si es leal, le prestan y convidan,  
y hasta los principales le honran y aman,  
le buscan, le regalan y le aclaman. (149)

What must not be missed here is that *El burlador de Sevilla*, while appearing during the heyday of the *Siglo de Oro tragicomedia*, does not necessarily follow the same scheme outlined by Lope. In fact, the immoral qualities of each character (save the King, which ingratiatingly alludes to his moral superiority) imply that the play itself functions as

only presents superficially integral characters; while the flaws of the secondary cast comes nowhere near the moral depravity continuously enacted by don Juan himself, these imperfections unmistakably betray a sense of societal decay and corruption.

Each of the characters in *El burlador de Sevilla* participates, some more grievously than others, in perfidious actions: both don Pedro and Isabela lie to their liege; seduced by the *burlador*, multiple women betray their betrothed (and one, Aminta, does so on the very day of her wedding!); and, at the pinnacle of perfidy is don Juan himself, whose, “mayor / gusto que en [s]í puede haber / es burlar una mujer / y dejarla sin honor” (257).<sup>6</sup> This pattern of immorality does little to hide the imperfections of the society it represents. Only taking into account one side of the gender divide, Jonathan Thacker indicates that, “none of don Juan’s female victims is blameless in their relationships with him. [. . .The] women’s immorality and inappropriate behavior is in turn only a part of the morally confused world that Tirso depicts, and here the historical displacement should not hide the world of seventeenth century Spain” (67). Of course, moral inconsistencies are found in both sexes, and men are equally guilty of sexual promiscuity, if not more so, given the thoroughly libertine disposition of the play’s male protagonist.

These ideas bring the discussion back to one of Valle’s major societal critiques at the opening of the twentieth century: the moral depravity of his nation. In a 1911 interview with Gregorio Campos, Valle concludes that:

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a hybrid between “morality play,” a theatrical form begun in the late medieval age (e.g., any one of the many *auto sacramentales*) and perfected by Calderón de la Barca (with *El gran teatro del mundo*, published in 1655) at the end of Spain’s Golden Age, and *comedia*. While the central figures remain consistent with Lope’s typical *dramatic personae*, the themes and consequences follow a rigorous moral pattern.

<sup>6</sup> In the first act, don Pedro tells the king a colorful story of how Isabela’s incognito lover evades capture by leaping over the garden wall (176). Isabela later confesses that her seducer was none other than Duke Octavio himself, a blatant lie, given that she clearly does not recognize don Juan—whereas she knows precisely who Duke Octavio is and what he looks like (178). Out of the *burlador*’s many seductions, I consider Aminta’s to be the most brazen. By claiming a type of *derecho de pernada* and promising marriage to a peasant girl, he steals Batricio’s bride on the very day of his wedding (312-13).

El problema societario entra de lleno en el problema nacional, que muchos creen ser de *cultura* cuando es esencialmente *moral*. Después ahonda más las diferencias, un egoísmo señalado en ciertas clases elevadas, y el odio reconcentrado en las inferiores, y en ambas, un meditado alejamiento del sentir cristiano.<sup>7</sup> (*Entrevistas* 86)

Three centuries have apparently done very little to change the moral landscape in Spain: nobles still cheat and defame each other, the clergy, as described in the previous chapter, is corrupt and politically inept, and, just as Felipe IV's constant infidelity set a poor precedent for his people, the sheer instability of Spain's political system at the turn of the century (evidenced by the brief failure of the first Spanish Republic and electorally fraudulent *Restauración*) does little to inspire a populace desperately in need of inspiration and political opportunities. While immorality continues to percolate throughout the nation, the historical circumstances wherein don Juan's persona is to be interpreted (i.e., the first half of twentieth-century Spain) have shifted; e.g., technology has advanced at blinding speed, forcing aspiring don Juans to reinvent their techniques of seduction.

In a 1940 essay, "Gloria y miseria del conde de Villamediana," Gregorio Marañón describes the transformation that his modern society has effected on courtship, an especially important activity for any prospective don Juan. "Don Juan," writes Marañón,

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<sup>7</sup> It is especially significant to note that Manuel Alberca and Cristobal González overtly recognize that this statement appears at a time when, "Valle contemplaba el 'problema de España' desde una perspectiva tradicionalista muy limitada," apparent from his attempts to placate the public with a form of political jargon that resonated with a "dialéctica decimonónica de andar por casa" (146). They further dispute that Valle's proposal, "resultaba tan insuficiente [. . .] que en su apelación a las buenas intenciones morales significaba bien poca ya en aquellos años, que habían sido testigos, por ejemplo, del desarrollo del anarquismo obrero y de efemérides tan relevantes como la Semana Trágica de Barcelona [en 1909]" (146). For my purposes, rather than focus on Valle's evidently inadequate response, I recur to the moral implications of his assessment. Instead of blaming his culture for the decline of the Spanish empire, he criticizes his countrymen for their immoral attitude; an attitude that, I venture to add, corresponds intimately with the sexual proclivity of don Juan.

ha representado una realidad: todo el juego teatral, aventurero y romántico que suponía la seducción de la mujer. Hoy, ese juego se ha hecho innecesario. Unas breves palabras por teléfono y el vuelo raudo de un automóvil hacia las afueras resumen todo el proceso de lo que antes era intriga misteriosa o heroica aventura. [...El] amor, más que por todas las influencias espirituales, se ha transformado por dos cosas que son pura materia: el pequeño automóvil y el teléfono, que han matado a Celestina y a Ciutti, colaboradores, y en parte creadores, del prestigio del Burlador. (*Don Juan* 335)

While Marañón limits his observations to two early technological achievements (namely, the automobile and the telephone), today's list can easily expand to more modern advancements (e.g., the cellphone, the internet, virtual reality, etc.), all of which still reduce the “intriga misteriosa o heroica aventura” of the *burla*. Further, Marañón only describes two facets of a single category (technology) as having a detrimental effect on the amorous ability of the *burlador*; in reality, history itself—societal fluctuations, aesthetic variations, political upheavals, and religious revivals—determines the success or failure of a symbolic figure such as don Juan.

As José Ortega y Gasset deduces in his 1921 article, “Introducción a un ‘don Juan,’” circumstances at both the personal and national levels require that the don Juan myth remodels itself according to the vagaries of history. It is not enough to simply regurgitate the former, “medieval” model (as Ortega y Gasset describes it); rather, “las figuras simbólicas son a modo de seres vivos que sufren las vicisitudes de los tiempos, cambian con ellos, degeneran y madurecen, tomando el vario cariz de las llamas humanas que en ellos se proyectan” (122). Further, Ortega speculates that,

[c]ada nueva época significa la conquista que el hombre hace de una noción más complicada y exacta de lo que las cosas son y de lo que deben ser, de la realidad y del ideal. Pues bien: el tema tradicional deberá ser sometido a las exigencias de ese nuevo y más riguroso conocimiento. Solo así tendrá para esa época sentido, y esto—tener sentido—es lo que diferencia a un símbolo, a una creación ideológica o estética, de los hechos vulgares que traman la existencia y se yuxtaponen los unos a los otros porque han acontecido unos tras otros. (122)

For Ortega, classical models must adjust and accommodate to each new historical setting. Those that cannot reintegrate themselves into such settings are forgotten, i.e., they become mere “hechos vulgares que traman la existencia.” The true test of eternal significance for any classical figure, therefore, is its ability to expand and embrace new religious, aesthetic, philosophical, and—especially important for don Juan—theatrical trends. In other words, the ability to adapt and relate to a given historical moment are hallmark qualities of symbolic characters. Tirso de Molina’s don Juan therefore serves a dual function: from a distance, his duplicitous character reflects the deceitful nature of his society at large, both within and without the text, i.e., both the world portrayed in *El burlador de Sevilla* and 1630 Spain; drawing closer, however, he serves as a prototype for all future models based on the *burlador*, i.e., his actions serve as a blueprint for future *burlas*—a model that can and indeed should transform depending on the new circumstances. The following sections will address a pertinent shift in destiny between Tirso de Molina’s *burlador*, José de Espronceda’s don Félix de Montemar, and José Zorrilla’s don Juan Tenorio by following the *figurón*’s dramatic evolution from Spain’s Golden Age to the peak of Spanish Romanticism. Between these two eras, ideas, politics, and aesthetic sensitivities have clearly changed, generating a diabolical and ostensibly monogamous type of *burlador*.

### III. A Devil in Disguise

Before arriving at José Zorrilla's 1844 interpretation of the don Juan myth, we must pass through José de Espronceda's *El estudiante de Salamanca*, published four years earlier.<sup>8</sup> Espronceda's work tells the story of an incorrigible seducer, don Félix de Montemar, "[s]egundo don Juan Tenorio," and weaves together poetic and dramatic verse in order to masterfully impart a dark tale of loss, seduction, and irredeemable condemnation (Espronceda 62). There are no moments of consternated repentance in *El estudiante de Salamanca*, such as the *burlador*'s final pleading with don Gonzalo upon clutching his stony hand: "[a] tu hija no ofendí, / que vio mis engaños antes. [. . .] Deja que llame / quien me confiese y absuelva" (*Burlador* 363); rather, Montemar's actions reflect a diabolical figure that takes a resolute dive towards his own destruction.<sup>9</sup> He who began a "[s]egundo don Juan Tenorio," takes on a much more sinister epithet in the final part as a, "[s]egundo Lucifer," whose "[g]randiosa, satánica figura [. . .] provoc[a] la cólera divina" (62, 110-11). Between *el burlador* and Montemar, it is not so much their actions that differ, but rather their individual resolve to continue as unrepentant seducers, despite the consequences of their respective choices. In considering the two protagonists, while indisputably similar in activity and trajectory, one can irrefutably confirm that Espronceda's Montemar preserves his persona as a seducer more integrally than Tirso's *burlador*; Montemar's determined attitude at the point of condemnation—" [. . .] no temo, / a llevar determinado / esta aventura al extremo"—sharply contrasts with the *burlador*'s pleading for mercy (115). Rather

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<sup>8</sup> While don Juan appears in various texts outside the Iberian Peninsula between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Molière's 1660 theatrical work *Dom Juan ou le Festin de pierre*, Shadwell's 1676 play *The Libertine*, Mozart's famous 1787 opera *Don Giovanni*, Lord Byron's unfinished 1824 epic poem *Don Juan*, and Kierkegaard's 1843 philosophical treatise *Either/Or*, to name only a few of many), I am exclusively considering works that have definitive Spanish origins. Since Valle's principal concern focuses on the deplorable state of his present Spanish society, it seems especially appropriate to consult works that derive from the same national milieu.

<sup>9</sup> Such allusions referring to pacts made with the devil and other diabolic associations are common fare for romantic drama. Before leaping from a cliff to his demise at the end of *Don Álvaro o La fuerza del sino*, Duque de Rivas's protagonist hauntingly confesses, "soy un enviado del infierno, soy el demonio exterminador..." (189).

than ask how closely the characteristics of Montemar reflect those of his predecessor, we can begin delineating how the two figures differ and ascribe those differences to historical, cultural, and societal transformations.

In a 1926 interview with Mariano Román, Valle identifies three themes by which don Juan can be characterized: a libertine attitude with respect to the dead and religion; second, an utter carelessness when considering (or, as is so often the case, ignoring) the rights of others; and third, his enhanced ability to seduce women. “En don Juan,” Valle explains, “se han de desarrollar tres temas. Primero: falta de respeto a los muertos y a la religión. Segundo: satisfacción de sus pasiones saltando sobre el derecho de los demás. Tercero: conquista de mujeres. Es decir, demonio, mundo y carne, respectivamente” (*Entrevistas* 310). By directly associating don Félix with the devil (“[s]egundo Lucifer”), Espronceda’s rendition of the don Juan figure closely follows the pattern laid out by Valle (62). Whereas Tirso’s *burlador* exhibits diabolical characteristics, i.e., he unmistakably demonstrates a “falta de respeto a los muertos y a la religión,” he is never integrally associated with the devil, as is Montemar (Valle-Inclán *Entrevistas* 310). His final longing for confession in *El burlador de Sevilla* betrays him as a penitent character. This, of course, fits with the moral structure found so prevalently in Golden Age drama. As Benito Varela Jácome writes, “Espronceda rompe con el tradicional arrepentimiento de los réprobos en el teatro español del Siglo de Oro. [. . . Montemar] no teme al Cielo ni al Infierno” (46). The final two factors in Valle’s tally of attributes directly related to don Juan—societal inconsiderateness and sexual adroitness—are easily proven in either work; the *burlador*’s carefree demeanor is matched by Montemar’s inherent selfishness. While both enjoy sexual favors, the *burlador* is shown as a figure who practices his craft on the stage

throughout the course of the play while Montemar arrives *in medias res* with a long history of sexual exploitations.

The poet, in supplying Montemar's backstory, reaffirms his debauchery in order to connect don Félix with the don Juan model. Described as one with a "[c]orazón gastado, mofa / de la mujer que corteja, / y, hoy despreciándola, deja / la que ayer se le rindió," (62). From one lover to another, don Félix's passions know no bounds: "[s]iempre en lances y en amores, / siempre en báquicas orgías" (63). In this sense, Espronceda's Montemar follows a similar scheme as Tirso's *burlador*: both successfully seduce multiple women. Where don Félix diverges from the *burlador*, however, has to do with how many women he seduces on the stage or during the course of his work. In other words, the public *watches* the titular character in *El Burlador de Sevilla* perform his characteristic seductions. In the case of *El estudiante de Salamanca*, the public is told that Montemar is a "segundo don Juan," but only witnesses a single semi-erotic act (the fatal kiss between don Félix and his skeletal "esposa" (120-21)), a far cry from the "conquista de mujeres" that Valle anticipates (*Entrevistas* 310). This shift in desire, from multiple lovers to a single beloved, distills from Tirso's devotion to the marital pact in *El Burlador de Sevilla*.

Since Tirso's don Juan is promised, by the king, nonetheless, to marry doña Ana, any derivations from this formula, such as the *burlador*'s relationships with Isabela, Tisbea, or Aminta, all prove fruitless and unmanageable. Don Juan must, in the end, commit to doña Ana, as demanded by her phantom father, don Gonzalo. In that same vein, don Félix is compelled to unite with doña Elvira, the woman he promises to wed. A single moment in Tirso's play, the fulfilment of don Juan's vow, is condensed into don Félix's engagement with doña Elvira in Espronceda's work. Rather than prove why the *burlador* is a don Juan (i.e., due to his multiple

amorous conquests), Espronceda, by dubbing his character a “segundo don Juan Tenorio,” draws from a rich history of successful seduction and amorous evasion found in various renditions of don Juan that precede 1840, the year *El estudiante de Salamanca* was published.<sup>10</sup> He then positions don Félix before his final seductive act which, ironically, also seals his doom. While the two dramatic representations draw from the same don Juan profile, their modes of production differ: Tirso pens the first dramatic recreation of the myth while Espronceda draws from a long literary history, originating in *El Burlador de Sevilla*, to validate his representation.<sup>11</sup>

In holding these distinct don Juan models up for comparison, a gradual transformation in the *figurón* from Tirso to Espronceda becomes evident. Rather than demonstrating *what* makes don Juan a seducer, as Tirso does, Espronceda takes advantage of don Juan’s rich literary tradition to project don Juan into a new, unfamiliar, and entirely supernatural territory. While Tirso’s final scene, wherein don Juan encounters a statuesque version of his father-in-law, has a strong supernatural component, it pales in comparison to Espronceda’s *Danse Macabre*, a smorgasbord of phantoms, specters, and ghosts, complete with a skeletal bride. While such paranormal fancy can be attributed to the whims of Spanish Romanticism, Espronceda also fixates don Juan’s amorous focus upon a single beloved.<sup>12</sup> Instead of polyamorously pursuing multiple women, don Félix limits his search to a single soul—doña Elvira—who playfully eludes him until she seals his fate at the end of the work. This movement, from a promiscuous don Juan

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<sup>10</sup> Please consult footnote 8 for a brief list of several renditions, from without the Iberian Peninsula, of the don Juan myth.

<sup>11</sup> Gregorio Marañón insists that Tirso’s *burlador* is not without precedent and offers, as one viable forerunner of the seducer’s legacy, the corrupt priest, Francisco García Calderón, who was denounced by the Inquisition in 1631 for inciting nuns into scandalous scenes of sexual fervor. For more information, I direct the reader to pages 307-12 of Marañón’s 1940 article, “Don Juan.” Blanca de los Ríos, on the other hand, identifies a certain Duque de Osuna, the subject of Cristóbal de Monroy y Silva’s *comedia*, *Las mocedades del Duque de Osuna*, as a 1592 prototype for don Juan (529).

<sup>12</sup> While a later example, the enclave of undead priests that reanimate to sing the “Miserere de la Montaña” in Bécquer’s 1862 *leyenda*, “El miserere,” reiterates this romantic penchant for the supernatural.

into an essentially monogamous figure, marks a permutation in the don Juan myth that coincides with his historical development. Gregorio Marañón argues that don Juan's passion swings on a pendulum according to the sensual demands placed on it; in his romantic manifestations, "el amor se regala," i.e., the multiple conquests during his classical phase, relationships characterized by their novelty and brevity (when "el amor se conquista y se sublima"), reduce into a single amorous adventure, a fixated fascination on a single lover (336). The romantic don Juan surrenders his repeated, passionate conquests for a single, engrossing pursuit. As Ortega y Gasset asserted in 1921, don Juan must adjust according to the aesthetic demands of the time of his inception, be it Tirso's original iteration or any of his future renditions. In 1844, four years after *El estudiante de Salamanca*, another don Juan inserts himself into the procession of seducers, Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*.

#### IV. Division in the Rakes

The fundamental difference between Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* and José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* has to do with the way don Juan meets his demise. In Tirso's play, don Juan is condemned for his licentiousness; in Zorrilla's work, he is saved through the intervention of doña Inés, despite his reckless behavior. A peculiar transformation in the titular character happens throughout the course of *Don Juan Tenorio*: from an unrepentant seducer, he evolves into a sincere, devoted courtier. How does such a conversion happen? Why does it happen? In order to answer these questions, we must appeal, in part, to the seductive shift between Tirso and Zorrilla, already evident in *El estudiante de Salamanca*.

As explained in the previous section, don Félix de Montemar, unlike his precedent, focuses on a single amorous conquest. This singular focus differs from don Juan's multiple

encounters, scattered throughout *El Burlador de Sevilla*. One could argue that Elvira, don Félix's beloved, is comparable to Tisbea or Aminta in *El Burlador de Sevilla*, i.e., she represents only one of his many seductions (which *El estudiante de Salamanca* infers, but never displays). She differs from these models only inasmuch as she is promised to marry don Félix (“¡Es su esposo!, los ecos retumbaron, / ¡La esposa al fin que su consorte halló! / Los espectros con júbilo gritaron: / ¡Es el esposo de su eterno amor!” (119)), which inherently connects her with doña Ana, don Juan's bride-to-be in *El Burlador de Sevilla*.<sup>13</sup> One conclusion that can be derived from Tirso's famous maxim, is that the marital vow—“quien tal hace”—is sacred and must be upheld—“que tal pague.” While don Juan's frivolous adventures offer intrigue and comic dimension to the work, its overlying message can be interpreted as an injunction for marital fidelity, especially prevalent at the end of the play, when four distinct couples agree to wed. “If it seems,” notes James Mandrell, “that the *burlador* disrupts the harmony of an idyllic world, destroys happy conjugal unions, the truth is otherwise. Only at the end of the anarchical path stretching from Italy to Spain is matrimony resurrected as the symbol of social harmony” (81).

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<sup>13</sup> How is doña Ana any different from Aminta (to whom don Juan promises to wed)? On two levels: first, in marrying Aminta, don Juan would marry someone who belongs to an inferior social class (the “sayal” he refers to when seducing Tisbea, explaining that, “Amor es Rey / que iguala con justa ley / la seda con el sayal” (219)); second, the king, whose word is law, informs don Gonzalo that he wishes to marry his daughter to don Juan:

REY. [...] ¿tenéis hijos?  
 DON GONZALO. Gran señor,  
 una hija Hermosa y bella,  
 en cuyo rostro divino  
 se esmeró Naturaleza  
 REY. Pues yo os la quiero casar  
 de mi mano.  
 DON GONZALO. Como sea  
 tu gusto, digo, señor,  
 que yo lo acepto por ella;  
 pero, ¿quién es el esposo?  
 REY. Aunque no está en esta tierra  
 es de Sevilla y se llama  
 don Juan Tenorio. (215)

These two characteristics—her nobility and the royal mandate—make don Juan's engagement to doña Ana all the more binding than his empty promises to the other women in the play.

Rather than focus on don Juan's amorous exploits, Zorrilla channels don Juan's passion into a single merciful figure: doña Inés.

Although the final redemptive scene in *Don Juan Tenorio* clearly sets the play apart from Tirso's version, the first act, similar to its predecessor, portrays a salacious and irascible protagonist. "Efectivamente," writes Aniano Peña, "la primera impresión que recibimos al encararnos con el héroe zorrillesco, es su enorme parecido físico y espiritual con el libertino tradicional, burlador de mujeres de toda clase social" (43). In the same spirit as Espronceda's work, don Juan finds himself in a gambling hall, awaiting the arrival of his accomplice, don Luis, in order to compare their adventures of the previous year.

JUAN. La apuesta fue...

LUIS. Porque un día

dije que en España entera  
 no habría nadie que hiciera  
 lo que hiciera Luis Mejía. [. . .]  
 y vinimos a apostar  
 quién de ambos sabría obrar  
 peor, con mejor fortuna,  
 en el término de un año. (92)

From shacks to palaces to convents, don Juan spends the entire year seeking out people to deceive, rivals to fight, and women to seduce. When the final tally arrives, he methodically defeats don Luis in every category. To add insult to injury, don Juan defies his opponent in one more act of treachery:

JUAN. Pero, la verdad a hablaros,  
 pedir más no se me antoja.  
 porque, pues vais a casaros,  
 mañana pienso quitaros  
 a doña Ana de Pantoja.

LUIS. Don Juan, ¿qué es lo que decís?

JUAN. Don Luis, lo que oído habéis.

LUIS. Ved, don Juan, lo que emprendéis.

JUAN. Lo que he de lograr don Luis. (100)

By promising to steal don Luis's bride-to-be the night before his wedding, don Juan imitates his forerunner's deception of Aminta. He follows the diabolical model set by don Félix Montemar, especially evident when his own father declares him a "[hijo] de Satanás" (103).<sup>14</sup> Brash, immoral, and defiant, the initial actions of Zorrilla's protagonist belong squarely to the libertine don Juan persona, as developed by Tirso de Molina.

Everything changes, however, when don Juan meets doña Inés. His diabolical demeanor diffuses into a single purpose—to obtain her love and hand in marriage. Curiously, this encounter with doña Inés transpires due to the other facet of don Juan's duplicitous wager with don Luis:

LUIS. Sólo una os falta en justicia.

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<sup>14</sup> This quote, in its entirety, is rather peculiar. Upon recognizing how terrible his son is in reality, don Diego confronts him, denying any paternal connection.

JUAN. ¡Válgame Cristo, mi padre!

DIEGO. Mientes, no lo fui jamás.

JUAN. ¡Reportaos, con Belcebú!

DIEGO. No, los hijos como tú  
 son hijos de Satanás.

While don Diego tries to disassociate himself from don Juan, by accusing his son of diabolical associations, he simultaneously condemns himself as a devil.

JUAN. ¿Me la podéis enseñar?

LUIS. Sí, por cierto: una novicia

que esté para profesar.

JUAN. ¡Bah! Pues yo os complaceré

doblemente, porque os digo

que a la novicia uniré

la dama de algún amigo

que para casarse esté. [. . .]

Conque lo dicho, don Luis,

van doña Ana y doña Inés

en la apuesta. (99, 104)

Don Juan's initial intent, to deceive a novice, transforms according to his meeting and consequent fixation with doña Inés. Ramiro de Maeztu adds that this act, a movement from lust to love, marks the tragic fall of don Juan: “[s]u tragedia es el amor por doña Inés. No tenía necesidad de haberse enamorado” (“La razón” 69). Further, Jacinto Grau, in the preface to his 1927 *El burlador que no se burla*, disputes that this act irreversibly disrupts the don Juan myth, betraying what he describes as “su naturaleza elemental”: “al desmentirse a sí mismo enamorándose hondamente, con querer de alma, deja de ser lo que es don Juan, ya que esta figura es tan dinámica como limitada” (590). While Grau's observation strikes me as overly specific—i.e., he only considers two iterations of the myth (*El burlador de Sevilla* and *Don Juan Tenorio*)—, I admit that a transformation between Tirso and Zorrilla has indeed occurred. Don Juan, after the end of the first act of *Don Juan Tenorio*, no longer behaves as his classical model. Rather, as we have seen with don Félix de Montemar, don Juan has entered into the Romantic

mode. The aesthetic demands have changed and don Juan accordingly must acclimate to the new literary protocol.

This dramatic shift in don Juan's persona can be separated into three categories: the Classical, the Romantic, and what Oscar Mandel describes as "the molecular." He explains, "[d]on Juan's mythical life readily divides itself into three acts, the Classical, the Romantic, and what I shall call the Molecular, with some overlapping between the second and third of these" (21).<sup>15</sup> While *El Burlador de Sevilla* belongs to the first period, both *El estudiante de Salamanca* and *Don Juan Tenorio* occupy the second phase. Mandel detects two significant differences between the classical and the Romantic periods: "[i]n his classical career, don Juan is a frank and joyous libertine. [. . .] He stays of a piece from start to finish; he and his antagonists and victims are moved by simple and single purposes; and he is flatly damned at the end" (22); of the romantic period, Mandel writes that "don Juan is more adult and less naïve. [. . .] He had been a kind of playboy once, a juvenile delinquent with a lineage; [. . .] the Romantic don Juan is capable, or would like to be capable of love. His dissipations are no longer motivated by his love for dissipation but by his ardent longing for the perfect woman who eludes him" (22-23). Mandel argues, essentially, that between the Classical and Romantic models, don Juan has transformed himself from a libertine, condemned figure, into a protagonist consumed with love for a single, idealized woman. Perhaps most significantly, Mandel recognizes that the Romantic version of don Juan "is more adult." By acknowledging that don Juan has aged (over two centuries separate *El burlador de Sevilla* from *Don Juan Tenorio*), Mandel also explains why the *figurón* develops different characteristics, some of which radically differ from the Classical model. By growing

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<sup>15</sup> Mandel's definition of a molecular don Juan strays into contemporary models of the *figurón* (e.g., Rostand's 1921 *La Dernière nuit de Don Juan*), a model that, as Mandel states, "ceases to enjoy himself" (25). Parallels can be formed between Mandel's molecular composition and Valle's marqués de Bradomín, especially in his latter manifestations.

older, his seductive ability, a trenchant skill for any *burlador*, diminishes. By the time we arrive at Valle-Inclán's marqués de Bradomín, don Juan has entered into the twilight of his career—a seducer no longer effectively able to seduce.

The following portions of this chapter will consider Valle-Inclán's contribution to the don Juan myth, specifically through the evolution of his marqués de Bradomín. Since the marqués makes several appearances in the literary world of Valle-Inclán, I will follow the transformation that he experiences between each of these appearances. From the *Sonatas* to *Luces de Bohemia*, the marqués resolutely develops into a decadent and disfigured don Juan.

## V. An Aging Don Juan: *Las sonatas*

In 1902, Valle publishes his first novel featuring El marqués de Bradomín, *La sonata de otoño*. So begins the four-year publication of a series of four different novels, each deliberately titled by one of the natural seasons. These titles also metaphorically extend to the period in the marqués's life that is portrayed by each novel.<sup>16</sup> As the subtitle indicates, these *memorias del marqués de Bradomín* cast a reflective glance on a life lived carefree, yet not necessarily without regrets; in fact, several of the marqués's apparently don Juan-esque actions have disastrous consequences. For example, after discouraging Concha, the object of his seduction in *La sonata de otoño*, from seeking penitence for her adulterous activity with him, the marqués makes love to her, only to realize that, shortly after they consummate their illicit act, Concha has died. What follows is a bizarre scene where the marqués attempts to carry Concha's corpse to her bedroom,

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<sup>16</sup> While the titles themselves refer to each of the four seasons (*primavera*, *estío*, *otoño*, and *invierno*), the order of publication betrays their expected sequence: the first novel, *Sonata de otoño*, appears in 1902; the second, *Sonata de estío*, is published in 1903; the third, *Sonata de primavera*, is first seen in 1904; and the fourth and final novel in the tetralogy, *Sonata de invierno*, makes its appearance in 1905. Such chronological inaccuracy does not preclude the corresponding representative value of each novel; each setting reflects the marqués at a different age in his life—from youthful exuberance (*primavera*) to hoary contemplation (*invierno*).

has second thoughts, visits Concha's sister, Isabel, passionately kisses her, and then finally drags the corpse back to the bedroom, only to get its hair stuck in the doorjamb.<sup>17</sup> After some frantic pulling, the marqués somehow manages to yank the hair free and eventually lay the corpse down in its bed (OC I 516-20). Such morbidly humorous misadventures can be found scattered throughout the *Sonatas*. As characteristic of the don Juan persona, the marqués's exploits are constantly driven by his passionate impulses. Each novel contains one or several amorous adventures focused on a single woman and a triumphant seduction.

On the spectrum of don Juan's evolution, as described by Oscar Mandel, the marqués occupies a liminal area. The escapades that fill the pages of his *Sonatas* place him amid the Romantic manifestations of his legend, but the moment when he sits and recollects, reminiscing about his past—i.e., when he is no longer young, attractive, or audacious—, the time when he begins to compose his *memorias*, disconnects him from the don Juan persona. He fades into a former don Juan, a figure recognizable only for his past actions. This decadent period, Mandel insightfully explains, is, in fact, a natural part of the don Juan myth. Described by Mandel as the “molecular” phase, he asserts that, “[t]he name points to the science which dominates our lives; to our habit of analyzing all things down to their indivisible minimum; to the dehumanization of life; to our sense of isolation and fragmentation; to the virtual abandonment of the idea of human progress; and to our small helplessness” (25). In this sense, Mandel recognizes an existential version of don Juan—a powerfully introspective, intuitive, and guilt-ridden figure. Under this guise, several authors craft their own interpretations of don Juan: curiously original, as the product of the confessions overheard by a certain priest named Gabriel Tellez in Azorín's “El

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<sup>17</sup> As I will argue in this section, Valle's encounter with Concha's sister does not diminish his love for Concha, his primary lover in *Sonata de otoño*. It is worth remembering that, at this point in the novel, Concha has already passed away, thereby liberating Bradomín to seek out a new woman to idealize. By that same token, his brief and morbid (given the circumstances of her sister's death) relationship with Isabel hardly constitutes a new seductive pursuit.

castigo de don Juan” (1924); sanctimonious and forgiving, he appears in Manuel and Antonio Machado’s *Juan de Mañara* (1927); mysterious and repentant, he is portrayed in Miguel de Unamuno’s *El hermano Juan* (1934); effeminately impotent, the rationale for his amorous adventures is explained by Gregorio Marañón in his collection of essays titled *Don Juan* (1940); and parodically trivialized, the *figurón* is represented by Torrente Ballester in his novel, *Don Juan* (1964). In nearly every instance, the *burlador* has already experienced a life of debauchery and, upon finally advancing in age, realizes that he has lived an unfulfilled existence. It is at this point in his story that the ‘molecular’ don Juan materializes.

A key difference remains between these ‘molecular’ portrayals of don Juan and the marqués de Bradomín. While the former iterations feel remorse for their heinous actions, the marqués glorifies in his youthful conquests. Rather than dwell on the present implications of his misdeeds, he treasures the memory of the adventure and the excitement of the seduction. At the same time, however, the marqués also recognizes that he has aged. After all, he identifies himself as “ya muy viejo” in the epigraph to *Sonata de primavera* and, as he forlornly admits in *Sonata de invierno*, “cuando se tiene un brazo de menos y una cabeza llena de canas, es preciso renunciar el donjuanismo” (OC I 327, 596). By reflecting on the Romantic qualities of the marqués (his diabolic nature and single-minded fixation) that can be found in Valle’s *Sonatas*, I will assert that the marqués belongs to both categories of don Juan’s evolution—Romantic in his *memorias* and semi-‘molecular’ in his *vejez*—, both of which lead towards the *esperpento*.

The first Romantic characteristic to associate with the marqués de Bradomín centers on his relationship with the devil. As Alonso Zamora Vicente points out, “es en el Romanticismo cuando Satanás pasa a ocupar el sitio de honor en la creación estética” (46). In this sense, the marqués follows the model of don Félix, the protagonist of Espronceda’s *El estudiante de*

*Salamanca*, a “[s]egundo Lucifer” (62). Indeed, Ramón Pérez de Ayala writes that “[en] el marqués de Bradomín, [. . .] lo diabólico del carácter donjuanesco adquiere señalada importancia y significación. [. . .] Es mucho más diabólico que don Juan” (144). María Rosario, the object of the marqués’s fixation in *Sonata de primavera*, rejects his advances, “[p]orque sois el Demonio!” (OC I 380). The final, tragic scene of this *Sonata* further reinforces the marqués’s diabolical connection. After interrupting the marqués’s failed attempt to seduce María Rosario, her little sister, María Nieves, is precariously placed before a closed window. As the child leans back, however, the window opens and her body spills out into the courtyard, where she falls to her death. María Rosario, in a state of utter shock, screams, “¡Fue Satanás!” over and over. The marqués descends to lift the lifeless body into his arms, deposits it into the trembling arms of her sister, and rides away, with María Rosario’s demonic accusations echoing behind him (OC I 384-85).

In *Sonata de estío*, the marqués commits various acts of sacrilege, ranging from making love in a convent with La niña Chole—a married woman whose smile hides “el enigma de algún antiguo culto licencioso, cruel y diabólico”—to firing at and killing two bandits in a sacristy (OC I 418-19, 405; 423). A playful ruse on Concha in *Sonata de otoño* quickly escalates into a lustful pleading from the marqués:

El nudo de sus cabellos se deshizo, y levantando entre las manos albas de la onda negra, perfumada y sombría, me azotó con ella. Suspiré parpadeando:

—¡Es el azote de Dios!

—¡Calla, hereje!

—¿Te acuerdas cómo en otro tiempo me quedaba exánime?

—Me acuerdo de todas tus locuras.

—¡Azótame, Concha! ¡Azótame como a un divino Nazareno!... ¡Azótame hasta morir!...

—¡Calla!... ¡Calla!... (OC I 516)

Concha, hardly able to resist his advances, whispers, “[m]e das miedo cuando dices esas impiedades... Sí, miedo, porque no eres tú quien habla: Es Satanás... Hasta tu voz parece otra... ¡Es Satanás!” (OC I 516). In *Sonata de invierno*, at the peak of his devil-like assimilation, the marqués, already advanced in age, attempts to seduce a young novice (which resonates with don Juan’s promise to deceive “una novicia” in *Don Juan Tenorio* (99)) who also happens to be his daughter, Maximina (OC I 580-82). The Mother Prioress, upon realizing what the marqués has done, warns him, “[h]a cometido usted la mayor de sus infamias enamorando a esa niña” (OC I 585). As Zamora Vicente explains: “[e]l afán de perversidad llega al extremo en la *Sonata* invernal, donde enamora a una novicia que resulta su propia hija, sin que se conmueva nada su norma donjuanesca o señorial, ni siquiera ante la trágica realidad escueta, escalofriante: [l]a novicia se suicida” (50). Upon learning of his daughter’s demise, the marqués, “como si fuera el diablo, sal[ió] de la estancia” (OC I 586). The marqués’s connection with the devil correlates with the the devil-like imagery used in Espronceda’s *El estudiante de Salamanca* and the first act of Zorrilla’s *Don Juan Tenorio*. While don Félix is a “[s]egundo Lucifer,” Tenorio, according to his father, is a, “[hijo] de Satanás,” and the marqués acts, “como si fuera el diablo” (62; 103; OC I 586). Each protagonist is directly and indirectly associated with the devil, a key characteristic to the Romantic version of don Juan.

In addition to his diabolic overtures, the marqués also shares a singular amorous focus, a peculiar quality of the Romantic don Juan. As Leo Weinstein indicates, “he [don Juan] devotes his life to the single-minded pursuit of an ideal” (78). Like doña Elvira in *El estudiante de*

*Salamanca* and doña Inés in *Don Juan Tenorio*, each *Sonata* is driven by the marqués's seductive ambitions projected onto a single, idealized female: from María Rosario and La Niña Chole in *primavera* and *estío* to Concha and the countess Volfani in *otoño* and *invierno*, respectively.<sup>18</sup> As Mercedes Saenz-Alonso signals, “Bradomín ama con entrega. [. . .] Su ‘estar’ con una mujer es dedicación, se hace ‘ser’ de una mujer” (124). In *Sonata de primavera*, for example, the marqués develops a relationship with María Rosario, whom he identifies as, “el único amor de mi vida,” but is never able to consummate his love (OC I 350).<sup>19</sup> Like Zorrilla's doña Inés, María Rosario has entered the convent and is preparing to take her vows. While susceptible to the marqués's advances, she feels that they are a trial sent by the devil to dissuade her from becoming a nun. When pruning a rosebush, the marqués requests a single rose from María Rosario. She offers to pluck him the best one, but he replies:

—La mejor está en vuestros labios.

Me miró apartándose pálida y angustiada:

—No sois bueno... ¿Por qué me decís esas cosas?

—Por veros enojada.

—¿Y eso os agrada? ¡Algunas veces me parecéis el demonio! (OC I 379)

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<sup>18</sup> Ramiro de Maeztu distinguishes between the classical and the romantic models of don Juan, alluding to the romantic idealization of a single woman: “[e]l don Juan de Tirso es más fuerte que el de Zorrilla, pero el de Zorrilla es más humano, más completo y más satisfactorio. La diferencia fundamental consiste en que el de Tirso no llega nunca a enamorarse y el de Zorrilla sí. [. . .] Zorrilla le ha añadido un elemento de amor que potencia su interés humano, multiplica sus facetas y redime su figura moral” (“Don Juan” 59, 61).

In *Sonata de invierno*, the marqués has already entered into an elderly phase of existence and has, as he admits, lost his seductive abilities. Consequently, his amorous efforts with the countess Volfani (his primary target) and especially with Maximina (a curious and distasteful fascination) backfire.

<sup>19</sup> Given that the marqués's love affairs of *primavera* and *estío* have already been consummated by the time he reunites with Concha in *Sonata de otoño*, how can he claim to favor one lover over another? By that same token, there is a muted sense of passion in *Sonata de otoño*. Instead of relentlessly pursuing Concha, Bradomín takes pity on her, oftentimes referring to her as “pobre Concha” (he does so five times in the first chapter alone (OC I 457-58)). Such a relationship seems to contrast with the powerful passionate impulses exhibited with María Rosario and La niña Chole.

Although Bradomín never succeeds in his efforts at seducing María Rosario—he is effectively chased out of her home at the end of the novel—, he finds the challenge so enticing, the conquest so unlikely, that he cannot resist his predilection for seduction. One night, upon seeing her through the window as she says her prayers, the marqués decides to sneak into her room.

Yo cruzaba la terraza cuando una ráfaga violenta alzó la flameante cortina, y mis ojos mortales vieron arrodillada en el fondo de la estancia la sombra pálida de María Rosario. No puedo decir lo que entonces pasó por mí. Creo que primero fue un impulso ardiente, y después una sacudida fría y cruel [. . .] Me volví mirando en torno: [e]scuché un instante: [e]n el jardín y en el palacio todo era silencio. Llegué cauteloso a la ventana y salté dentro. La Santa dio un grito: [s]e dobló blandamente como una flor cuando pasa el viento, y quedó tendida, desmayada, con el rostro pegado en la tierra. (OC I 361)

Nothing transpires after María Rosario loses consciousness. Bradomín, perhaps feeling guilty for his indecency, gently carries her to her bed and sneaks back out the window. In some ways, the marqués's brash actions allude to a don Juan in his infancy, just barely learning how to be effective in the art of seduction. Indeed, the seasonal quality of the title, *Sonata de primavera*, gives a sense of freshness and beginning, alluding to the marqués's neophyte nature as a budding don Juan. Of course, Bradomín continues to develop by maturing into his seductive identity and, as demonstrated in *Sonata de estío*, he proves a very capable and competent don Juan.

The first moment the marqués de Bradomín sees La niña Chole in *Sonata de estío*, he realizes that he has fallen in love: “he visto por primera vez una singular mujer,” reflects the marqués, “[e]ra una belleza bronceada, exótica, con esa gracia extraña y ondulante de las razas nómadas [. . .] al verla [. . .], el corazón me dio un vuelco” (OC I 393-94). Recovering from the

loss of a former love (who bears an uncanny resemblance to La niña Chole), the marqués wastes no time in shifting his infatuation to the young, indigenous beauty. As their relationship develops, Bradomín manages to seduce La niña Chole, and eventually learns her deepest secret: she is married to her father. She laments:

—Yo era una pobre criatura inocente cuando fui víctima de aquel amor maldito. Volvió a cubrirse el rostro con las manos, y en el mismo instante yo adiviné su pecado. Era el magnífico pecado de las tragedias antiguas. La Niña Chole estaba maldita como Mirra y como Salomé. [. . .] Después, en voz baja y dulce, le dije:  
—Todo lo sé. El General Diego Bermúdez es tu padre. (OC I 421)

In a bizarre twist of fate, the woman the marqués idealizes is also the victim of incest. Such misfortune coincides with Bradomín's penchant for misadventure; having already survived the death of María Rosario's younger sister, fortune does not appear to favor the marqués.<sup>20</sup> Regardless, he bravely chooses to rescue his beloved from the "magnífico pecado."

In *Sonata de otoño*, we begin to question the marqués's seductive abilities. Concha, his beloved, is a sick woman at the brink of death. Her final request, to see Bradomín, a former lover that she cannot forget, sets the stage for the novel. Unlike his relationship with La niña Chole, Concha's 'seduction' requires little effort on the part of the marqués. After a few flirtatious chapters and a miraculous recovery (due, in no small part, to a bundle of magical herbs that

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<sup>20</sup> This situation brings up an alternative, generally ignored satirical reading of the *Sonatas*. What if Valle intended for readers to laugh at the marqués's frequent misfortunes? After all, in *Sonata de invierno*, Bradomín glorifies in the "bagatela," ascribing to it his entire *modus operandi*: "Yo no aspiro a enseñar, sino a divertir. Toda mi doctrina está en una sola frase: ¡Viva la bagatela! Para mí haber aprendido a sonreír, es la mayor conquista de la humanidad" (OC I 595). In his article, "El tema donjuanista en las *Sonatas*. Onomástica y voz narrativa," Daniel E. Gulstad provides a comprehensive explanation of the term "bagatela" and the various ways that it can be interpreted, ranging from a humorous, playful narrative device to an insightful, meaning-bearing allusion. I refer to the reader to his fifth footnote on page 302 for further insight.

Bradomín received from a mysterious peasant woman), the two rekindle their former relationship, despite the fact that the marqués has grown noticeably older:

Concha pasó sus manos por mis cabellos, y enlazando los dedos sobre mi frente, suspiró:

—¡Qué vida tan agitada has llevado durante estos dos años!... ¡Tienes casi todo el pelo blanco! (OC I 470)

The resulting relationship becomes increasingly complicated due to Bradomín's age. As he himself recognizes, “las mujeres no se enamoran de los viejos [. . .] sólo está bien en un don Juan juvenil” (OC I 470). In spite of his elderly appearance, however, the marqués still manages to seduce Concha. Can we attribute Concha's passion towards Bradomín to her memory of their former relationship? Is Concha in love with the younger version of the marqués, a self-proclaimed “don Juan juvenil,” regardless of his present state? As Bradomín recalls,

[e]lla recordaba las cosas más lejanas. Recordaba cuando éramos niños y saltábamos delante de las consolas para ver estremecerse los floreros cargados de rosas, y los fanales ornados con viejos ramajes áureos, y los candelabros de plata, y los daguerrotipos llenos de un misterio estelar. ¡Tiempos aquellos en que nuestras risas locas y felices habían turbado el noble recogimiento del Palacio, y se desvanecían por las claras y grandes antesalas, por los corredores oscuros, flanqueados con angostas ventanas de montante donde arrullaban las palomas!

(OC I 481)

These memories, embedded in the *Sonata de otoño*, a nostalgic recounting by the marqués of his time with the infirm Concha, provide a uniquely metafictional component to the overall trajectory of the novel. We can assert that Concha remembers with fondness her past relationship

with the marqués—“[e]n otro tiempo te he gustado mucho. Por muy inocente que sea una mujer, eso lo conoce siempre”—but recognizes that love can fade over time—“[t]e escribí que vinieses, porque ya entre nosotros no puede haber más que un cariño ideal... Tu comprenderás que, enferma como estoy, no es posible otra cosa” (OC I 482; 471). Their renovated tryst, fueled by the passion of days gone by, dwells on the way things *were* and not as they *are*. By the *Sonata de invierno*, the marqués, having clearly grown old and ugly (as alluded to in the epigraph), must cherish his past and renounce his seductive goals.

## VI. Don Juan Defeated

In 1966, Fernando Toro Garland polemically argues that the marqués de Bradomín is, in fact, not a don Juan. He writes, “Bradomín es un don Juan constantemente derrotado,” whose very identity, “negamos absolutamente [. . .] ser él un don Juan o al menos ser un don Juan típico. Tendrá ciertas actitudes donjuanescas que es otra cosa, pero Bradomín no es indudablemente un don Juan” (538, 544). Caught up in the representative distance between Tirso’s *Burlador de Sevilla* and the marqués de Bradomín, Toro Garland refutes the marqués’s self-ascribed title as “don Juan admirable,” disputing that Bradomín “[e]s un hidalgo y un caballero *de verdad*. Cosa que no es el don Juan clásico” (OC I 326; 539).<sup>21</sup> What Toro Garland seems to be missing, however, is don Juan’s development as a *figurón*. The evolution that Mandel detects, from Classical to ‘molecular’ versions of the character, a transition that allows

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<sup>21</sup> Further emphasizing his reliance on Tirso’s rendition of don Juan, Toro Garland states, “es un problema definir a don Juan sin referirse a uno determinado o decir que se habla del ‘clásico español,’ esto es, del *Burlador* de Tirso, ya que hasta los críticos tienen la tendencia a confundir inadvertidamente a éste con el romántico de Zorrilla” (538). While Toro Garland sparingly recognizes that Tirso’s model differs from Zorrilla’s, he never acknowledges that Valle-Inclán works with a model of don Juan that has already progressed through both the Classical and Romantic phases. Rather, Toro Garland focuses on the distance between the *burlador* and Bradomín, concluding that the gulf that separates their personas (based primarily on the fact that the marqués is intrinsically a “caballero; un caballero leal, un caballero formal, *un caballero español*,” whereas he views Tirso’s protagonist as nothing more than a rapscallion) legitimates his claim that the two have little to do with each other (544).

for don Juan to continuously embrace a new set of historical, philosophical, and aesthetic circumstances, is absent in Toro Garland's analysis. Rather, he holds rigidly to the traditional, what he describes as 'classical,' model of the seducer, "quien es un perfecto canalla y desvergonzado, más próximo a un pícaro vulgar" (539). In reality, the marqués de Bradomín is only one face of a multidimensional and prolific *figurón*; just as the *burlador* belongs to 1630, the year of his creation, so does Bradomín belong to the ideological and cultural circumstances swirling in Spain at the turn of the twentieth century, which differ widely from Tirso's and even Zorrilla's epistemic paradigms.

1898 signals the year that Spain loses the Spanish-American War. The loss reverberates among the Spanish intelligentsia, with various philosophers bemoaning Spain's critical situation as nothing less than a national disaster. Ramiro de Maeztu, shortly after the war, describes his nation as "despoblada, atrasada e ignorante," a "catástrofe," and a "desastre" ("En torno" 39, 40-41).<sup>22</sup> The *Sonatas* make their appearance in 1902, only four years after the close of the war. In this regard, it comes as no surprise that Bradomín enters the scene as a decadent don Juan. Rather than glorify archetypal figures from the Spanish past—as Toro Garland does, unable to dissociate Bradomín from the classical model of don Juan—, Valle concentrates on his catastrophic present, demonstrating over the course of four novels based on the four natural seasons, the transformation that has taken place in the *figurón*. Don Juan, having undergone almost three centuries worth of metamorphosis, has matured, aged, and become cynical.

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<sup>22</sup> Not all thinkers of Spain's so-called *Generación del 98* share Maeztu's apocalyptic view of their nation. Unamuno, for instance, viewed the crisis as a rude awakening for Spanish intellectualism, a chance to shake off the slumber of two centuries of cultural atrophy and reconnect with modern European thought (cf. H. Ramsden's 1974 article, "The Spanish 'Generation of 1898': The History of a Concept" for more details on Unamuno's optimism after the crisis of 1898). Even Maeztu, while initially disappointed with the disappearance of the final vestiges of Spain's former empire, recognizes the opportunity for national renovation: "saldrá otra España más noble, más bella, más rica y más grande. Empeño es éste no de un día, sino de una generación, de una generación bien templada, que luche heroicamente, con el fecundo heroísmo de la paz, contra [. . .] ese pesimismo desesperanzado que hace a muchos examinar con indiferencia la posibilidad de un desmoronamiento general" ("En torno" 42).

Bradomín is nothing less than a late manifestation of don Juan who realizes, after failing to effectively seduce Concha in the 1906 play, *El marqués de Bradomín*, that his days as a seducer have come to an end: “[n]o es rencor que siento, es la melancolía del desengaño, una melancolía como si el crepúsculo cayese sobre mi vida, y mi vida, semejante a un triste día de otoño, se acabase para volver a empezar con un amanecer sin sol” (OC II 153). This play adds another dimension to the marqués’s development, especially since it marks the beginning of the end for his life as a philanderer. From this point onward, he lives for the past.

*El marqués de Bradomín* combines elements from the *Sonata de otoño* and the *Sonata de invierno*. Like in *Otoño*, Bradomín strives to seduce Concha. But, as we see with the countess Volfani in *Invierno*, she remains faithful to her invalid husband, despite the marqués’s best efforts. After suffering a series of failures, Bradomín’s final ploy with Concha consists in him invoking their past love affair as a precursor for a renewed relationship: “Yo siempre había esperado en la resurrección de nuestros amores,” expresses the marqués, “era una esperanza que llenaba mi vida con un aroma de fe. ¡Era la quimera del porvenir! [. . .] ¿Por qué reniegas del pasado?” (OC II 149, 153). Resistant to the end, Concha resolutely responds, “[e]ste amor nuestro es imposible ya” (151). So closes the tales of Bradomín’s adventures as a don Juan. This, however, is not the final episode for the marqués. By focusing on his previous relationships and devoting the remainder of his life to recounting these memories (in his *Sonatas*, for instance), his character develops into a symbol for memory and *tempus fugit*.

## VII. What Comes Before

Between 1907 and 1911, Valle publishes his trilogy, *La guerra carlista*, a series of novels designed to capture the historical development and ultimate failure of the Carlist movement

during nineteenth-century Spain. Given that the marqués's allegiance to the *carlistas* is made abundantly apparent in the *Sonatas*, it comes as no surprise that he makes an appearance in the first novel of the trilogy, *Los cruzados de la causa*.<sup>23</sup> The novel opens with his fervent and immediate decision to sell his property and donate all proceeds to the cause. The Abbess, María Isabel, tries to dissuade him:

—No lo hagas... Sobre todo el palacio... Esas piedras, aun cuando sean vejeces, deben conservarse siempre.

—Lo vendo para comprar fusiles.

—De todos modos es triste. ¡A qué manos irá!

El marqués tuvo una sonrisa dolorosa y cruel.

—A las manos de algún usurero enriquecido. No hablemos de ello. Vendo el palacio como vendería los huesos de mis abuelos. Sólo debe preocuparnos el triunfo de la Causa. La facción republicana, que ahora manda, es una vergüenza para España. (OC I 679)

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<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of *Sonata de otoño*, the marqués praises his uncle, el Obispo de Mondoñedo, “¡Aquel santo, lleno de caridad, que había recogido en su palacio a la viuda de un general carlista, ayudante del Rey!” (OC I 502). A double gesture, this phrase identifies Bradomín as both a descendant of a Carlist supporter and a Carlist himself who recognizes Carlos's claim to the throne (“ayudante del Rey”). It is not until *Sonata de otoño* when we recognize the marqués's unquestionable fidelity to the *carlistas*: the first five chapters describe a meeting Bradomín has with Carlos and a promise that he makes to the queen to protect the king at all costs; on a mission from the pretender to rebuke a disobedient priest in a nearby village, Bradomín gets shot and has to have his arm amputated (OC I 525-38; 564-67). Towards the end of the *Sonata*, however, the marqués provides an unusual response when asked about the Carlist cause:

—Fray Ambrosio, estoy por decir que me alegro de que no triunfe la Causa.

Me miró lleno de asombro.

—¿Habla sin ironía?

—Sin ironía.

Y era verdad. Yo hallé siempre más bella la majestad caída que sentada en el trono, y fui defensor de la tradición por estética. El carlismo tiene para mí el encanto solemne de las grandes catedrales, y aun en los tiempos de la guerra, me hubiera contentado con que lo declarasen monumento nacional. (OC I 589)

This peculiar answer can only be justified when considering the fact that the marqués is writing his *memorias*. By the time he recounts his adventures, the *carlistas* have already dissolved into a defunct political party with no military power or public appeal. The same fallen beauty he praises has already undergone a process of deterioration.

This very act, selling the home and possessions that connect Bradomín to his noble past (“los huesos de [sus] abuelos”), seems contradictory to his nostalgic disposition. All throughout the *Sonatas*, he relies on his memories to substantiate his identity as “un don Juan admirable.” By liquidating his assets in order to fund the war, he seems to be turning his back on his past and looking to the future; he invests in an effort with an unforeseeable prospect. Whomever purchases his property will not only own Bradomín’s inheritance, but will also possess the only tangible objects that constitute the marqués’s noble past. His actions, while directly and abruptly severing his connection to nobility, also carry allegorical undertones. As he explains, the *hidalgos* and *mayorazgos* no longer have a viable social function:

¡El genio del linaje!... Lo que nunca pudo comprender el liberalismo, destructor de toda la tradición española. Los mayorazgos eran la historia del pasado y debían ser la historia del porvenir. Esos hidalgos rancios y dadivosos venían de una selección militar. Eran los únicos españoles que podían amar la historia de su linaje, que tenían el culto de los abuelos, y el orgullo de las cuatro sílabas del apellido. (711)

His lament, while clearly directed towards the liberal enemy, also foreshadows the defeat of the Carlists. Because the *hidalgos*, a final line of defense for the Carlist movement, have all—like the marqués and his uncle, don Juan Manuel de Montenegro—grown old and become “rancios,” the only possible conclusion to the war is failure.

The marqués de Bradomín, beginning as a derivation of don Juan, a relatively successful seducer (particularly with La niña Chole in *Sonata de estío*), becomes, over the trajectory of the *Sonatas*, a bitter, ineffective shadow of his former self. Entwined with the Romantic literary manifestations of the don Juan myth (especially evident in his satanic associations and devotion

to a single beloved), Bradomín participates in the *figurón*'s transformation into a pensive, philosophical, and remorseful—a quality that the marqués curiously does not possess—character. The spineless protagonist of the Machado brothers's *Juan de Mañara* and the introspective personage found in Unamuno's *El hermano Juan* are clear examples of this 'molecular' (as Mandel describes it) manifestation of don Juan. What sets the marqués apart from these iterations of the *figurón* is his devotion to the past: he ardently admires what 'molecular' figures ruefully regret. Due to his age and appearance, Bradomín becomes aware that he can no longer competently seduce women. The realization is gradual; it takes an entire natural cycle (i.e., *primavera* through *invierno*) for Bradomín to come to this conclusion. Once he does, however, he chooses to belong wholly to the past. He relishes in his *memorias*, even requesting that Concha, his former lover, recall their previous relationship in order to rekindle a new affair. Her rejection is the final straw in Bradomín's failed attempts at seduction. As he realizes, “[y]o estaba en ese declinar de la vida, edad propicia para todas las ambiciones y más fuerte que la juventud misma, cuando se ha renunciado al amor de las mujeres” (OC I 525-26). From this point onwards, he devotes himself entirely to the past, to a time when he adequately lived up to the title of “un don Juan admirable.”

### VIII. Glory in Defeat

Bradomín's final portrayal in Valle's *oeuvre* appears in his first recognized *esperpento*, *Luces de Bohemia*. Max Estrella, exhausted by the callousness and artistic apathy of *madrileña* society, has finally succumbed to his own mortality, leaving his dark world with a simple, “[b]uenas noches!” (OC II 935). Two scenes later, we find the marqués meandering through a cemetery with his friend, Rubén Darío, discussing the meaning of death:

RUBÉN. Marqués, la muerte muchas veces sería amable, si no existiese el terror de lo incierto. ¡Yo hubiera sido feliz hace tres mil años en Atenas!

MARQUÉS. Yo no cambio mi bautismo de cristiano, por la sonrisa de un cínico griego. Yo espero ser eterno por mis pecados.

RUBÉN. ¡Admirable! [. . .]

MARQUÉS. Nosotros divinizamos la muerte. No es más que un instante de la vida, la única verdad es la muerte. . . Y de las muertes, yo prefiero la muerte cristiana.

RUBÉN. ¡Admirable filosofía de hidalgo español! (944).<sup>24</sup>

The marqués's fascination with his past again resurfaces in *Luces de Bohemia*. Indeed, he aspires to “ser eterno por [sus] pecados.” These past sins can be found throughout his *Sonatas*, ranging from his part in María Nieves's death to his attempt to seduce his own daughter. Unlike his contemporary don Juan counterparts, however, the marqués admires his past and glorifies in his seditiously immoral actions; he feels no remorse for what he has done, and hopes his *memorias* will live into perpetuity, unlike his waning life. He comments, “[m]is Memorias se publicarán después de mi muerte.” (947). This focus on death, enhanced by his funereal setting, darkly foreshadows the marqués's demise. As he tells Darío, “¿[s]abe usted la edad que yo tengo? Me falta muy poco para llevar un siglo auestas. Pronto acabaré” (945). By all appearances, Bradomín's mortal clock is finally winding down. Any discussion of the future, even tomorrow, is inadmissible: “[a]nte mis ojos, y a la puerta de un cementerio, no se debe pronunciar la palabra mañana” (947). He, like don Estrafalario in *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, has nothing left to live for. Estrafalario remarks, “[t]odo nuestro arte nace de saber que un día pasaremos [. . .] Yo

<sup>24</sup> In commenting, “yo prefiero la muerte cristiana,” the marqués alludes to one of the three fundamental adjectives he uses to describe himself in his epigraph to the *Sonatas*: “Era feo, católico y sentimental” (OC I 326).

quisiera ver este mundo con la perspectiva de la otra ribera. Soy como aquel mi pariente que usted conoció, y que una vez, al preguntarle el cacique, qué deseaba ser, contestó: Yo, difunto” (993). Having already experienced his life as a don Juan, the marqués’s time has drawn to a close and he, like don Estrafalario, has prepared to meet his fate.

An underlying message in *Luces de Bohemia* is that aesthetic appreciation and sensitivity in Spain, synecdochally represented by an inhospitable Madrid in the 1920s, has disappeared. “¡Vivo olvidado!” laments Max to the local constable, “[t]ú has sido un vidente dejando las letras por hacernos felices gobernando. Paco, las letras no dan para comer. ¡Las letras son colorín, pingajo y hambre!” (OC II 915). The deplorable economic situation of an artist such as Max does not even provide the rudimentary substance with which to survive. Even Bradomín has trouble making ends meet. At the cemetery, he confides to Darío: “[n]ecesito dinero. Estoy completamente arruinado, desde que tuve la mala idea de recogerme a mi Pazo de Bradomín. ¡No me han arruinado las mujeres, con haberlas amado tanto, y me arruina la agricultura!” (947).<sup>25</sup> By paralleling the dire economic straits that each character faces, Valle sets up a fitting end for Bradomín. At the close of his encounter with Max in scene nine of *Luces de Bohemia*, Darío shares a final verse he composed for his dear friend, the marqués:

RUBÉN. ¡¡¡La ruta tocaba a su fin.

Y en el rincón de un quicio oscuro,

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<sup>25</sup> Especially persuasive connections can be drawn here between the marqués de Bradomín and Valle-Inclán. As Robert Lima notes in his *Valle-Inclán. The Theater of His Life*:

Valle-Inclán was back in Spain in the early part of 1922. He traveled immediately to “La Merced,” where his family awaited him unaware of his exact arrival date. Once again he devoted himself to the bucolic life with the dreams of a Virgil, but the administration of a farm would never be his forte. Eventually he gave up “La Merced” and moved back to Puebla del Caramiñal, living at 3 Calle de San Roque with his immediate family, where economic demands were not so great. It was to this that he referred when he had Bradomín say to Darío in *Luces de Bohemia*: “¡No me han arruinado las mujeres, con haberlas amado tanto, y me arruina la agricultura!” (139-40)

Nos repartimos un pan duro

Con el marqués de Bradomín!!!

JOVEN. Es el final, Maestro.

RUBÉN. Es la ocasión para beber por nuestro estelar amigo.

MAX. ¡Ha desaparecido del mundo!

RUBÉN. Se prepara a la muerte en su aldea y su carta de despedida fue la ocasión de estos versos. ¡Bebamos a la salud de un exquisito pecador!

MAX. ¡Bebamos! (924).

While the audience will come to realize that Bradomín has not yet died, but makes a later appearance in the cemetery with Darío in *Luces de Bohemia*, the morsel of bread, shared by the unfortunate artists, paints a final destitute picture for the marqués. All that he has left, all that sustains him, the very skeleton upon which he relies, is his *memorias*: “[m]is Memorias se publicarán después de mi muerte. Voy a venderlas como si vendiese el esqueleto” (947).<sup>26</sup>

It takes little imagination to picture the marqués de Bradomín as he composes his *Sonatas*. Sitting at a desk, his grey head bobs up and down, rhythmically in synch with the scratching of his pen. On occasion he pauses, raises his head to look out the window, and smiles broadly, lost in the memory of an irretrievable past. Moments such as these are captured in the pages of the *Sonatas* themselves, when their narrator interrupts his story, waxing nostalgic for a past life. In *Sonata de estío*, the marqués longs to look into La niña Chole’s eyes once more: “[r]ejuvenecido y feliz, con cierta felicidad melancólica, suspiraba por los amores ya vividos, [. . .] la nostalgia de viejas sensaciones: [s]umergíase en la niebla del pasado y saboreaba el

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<sup>26</sup> This quote curiously connects with Bradomín’s misgivings upon liquidating his properties in *Los cruzados de la causa*. Rather than sell “los huesos de [sus] abuelos,” the successful distribution of his *Sonatas* will be, “como si vendiese [su] propio esqueleto.” In a way, the marqués comments on the final property he owns; even as the *palacio* represented the remains of his ancestors, so do his novels, his *memorias*, symbolize his very bones.

placer de los recuerdos, ese placer de moribundo que amó mucho y en formas muy diversas” (OC I 395). At the end of *Sonata de otoño*, Bradomín reflects on the almost tangible character of his memories: “[m]is recuerdos, glorias del alma perdidas, son como una música lívida y ardiente, triste y cruel, a cuyo extraño son danza el fantasma lloroso de mis amores” (520). Even in *El marqués de Bradomín* does the protagonist recognize that, “mi alma está cubierta de recuerdos” and that “[d]esgraciadamente, no sé olvidar” (OC II 125, 133). Fundamentally, the marqués has aged to the point where what he *does* no longer matters as much as what he *did*. Hence, Bradomín creates his *Sonatas*, a reflection of a life lived passionately and without regrets.

### **IX. Don Juan Disfigured**

As an iteration of the don Juan myth during its ‘molecular’ cycle, the marqués de Bradomín exemplifies a version of don Juan that categorically differs from his fellow *figurones*. Instead of growing despondent due to the moral implications of his previous libertine lifestyle, he glorifies in and exalts his past. Like his ‘molecular’ counterparts, he has aged but, instead of deliberately trying to make amends for his prior misdeeds (as does the Machado brothers’s Juan de Mañara), he revels in the way things were, in his “perversión melancólica y donjuanesca que hace las víctimas y llora con ellas” (OC I 586). Unwilling to renounce his past, Bradomín acknowledges his temporary connection with don Juan, representing, essentially, a degenerated seducer. Valle-Inclán, in creating the marqués de Bradomín, has effectively generated a don Juan who has run his course: from a semi-successful seducer, he becomes an esperpentic caricature of the traditional *figurón*.

What good is an ugly don Juan? While Fernando Toro Garland would argue that Bradomín’s appearance, admittedly “feo,” immediately discredits his connection with don

Juan—“lo de ‘feo’ le aleja, naturalmente, a leguas del don Juan clásico (y no clásico) cuya apuesta y respladeciente, casi femenil figura, es su principal arma”—, such a quality also imparts a transformative nature to the *burlador* (OC I 326; 538). The key factor to any archetype, as Ortega y Gasset explains, is that it modifies itself to meet the historical, cultural, and artistic demands of its present moment. He writes, “las figuras simbólicas son a modo de seres vivos que sufren las vicisitudes de los tiempos, cambian con ellos, degeneran y madurecen, tomando el vario cariz de las llamas humanas que en ellos se proyectan” (“Introducción” 122). By necessity, el marqués de Bradomín, a product of Spain during the first decade of the twentieth century, reflects the same anxieties, frustrations, and successes of the moment of his creation. His appearance as a disfigured don Juan prefigures Valle-Inclán’s own degenerative aesthetic some fifteen years before the publication of *Luces de Bohemia*. Indeed, as Vicente Zamora writes in the revised prologue of his *Las sonatas de Valle-Inclán*: “veo las *Sonatas* como un escalón, forzoso e inexcusable, para ir de la prosa del XIX a la esperpentización de *Luces de Bohemia*” (9). He continues: “las *Sonatas* son el umbral de mayor esfuerzo estilístico de nuestro siglo. Un laboreo tenaz, que desemboca, en pocos años, en el esperpento, relleno de autenticidad hispánica en *Luces de Bohemia*” (11). The four novels that compose Valle-Inclán’s tetralogy not only introduce el marqués de Bradomín as “un don Juan admirable,” but, with the progress of the seasons, also describe the disappearance of his seductive ability. From an efficacious don Juan, he reduces into a mere shadow of his archetype, an elderly figure obsessed with the memories of his past, as demonstrated in *El marqués de Bradomín*. His final appearance, in *Luces de Bohemia*, unmistakably portrays a dying Bradomín, taking one last stroll with his dear friend, Rubén Darío, through the same graveyard where Max Estrella’s corpse was buried; a fitting end to a disfigured don Juan.

### Chapter 3 - Clans, Caves, and Condemnation: Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the Demise of *hidalguismo*

¡Indio mexicano que la Encomienda  
tornó mendigo!  
¡Indio mexicano!  
¡Rebélate y quema las trojes del trigo!  
¡Rebélate hermano!  
-Valle-Inclán "¡Nos vemos!" (OC II  
1835)

#### I. Revolutionary Reform

Valle-Inclán's 1922 poem, "¡Nos vemos!," written shortly after his visit to México, seeks to stir the native *indios* to revolt against the *gachupines*, the installed owners of large swaths of abundantly fertile Mexican land. "Los gachupines," writes Valle in a 1923 letter to Alfonso Reyes, "[s]on el extracto de la barbarie íbera. La tierra en manos de esos extranjeros es la más nociva forma de poseer. Peor mil veces que las manos muertas" (*Epistolario* 562). Valle fervently embraces the agrarian cause to reform and expand the rights of the *indios* some three years after the close of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Indignant, he continues, "[l]a revolución por la independencia, que no puede reducirse a un cambio de visorreyes, sino a la superación cultural de la raza india, a la plenitud de sus derechos, y a la expulsión de judíos y moriscos gachupines." There is no subtlety in Valle's allegory to Spain's fifteenth century expulsion of its "judíos y moriscos"; his intent is clear: México finds itself at a political crossroads as significant as the first steps of the burgeoning Spanish Golden Age. Instead of foreign heretics (as the Spanish Inquisition harshly identified the Sephardic Jews and Muslims), however, the *indios* must confront dismissive *gachupines*, the residual descendants of the *hidalgos* who, according to

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<sup>1</sup> The Mexican Revolution, beginning in 1910 and gradually ending by 1920, was the armed conflict between the fervent supporters of the *Porfiriato*, a thirty-five-year autocracy led by Porfirio Díaz, and the more democratically-minded revolutionaries guided by Francisco Madero. Valle was invited by Alfonso Reyes to visit Mexico in September of 1921 to celebrate the country's newfound independence. The 1920s, however, proved to be a very volatile period for Mexico and by 1926 the Cristero War erupts, initiating another three years of violence and bloodshed.

Valle, have meager ability to hold and maintain their lands. Unimpressed by the constitution of 1917, Valle feels that the *indios* should depose these incompetent landowners by forcefully taking what is theirs by right of inheritance.

“¡Nos vemos!” reiterates Valle’s revolutionary attitude towards the plight of the Mexican *indios* by actively encouraging them to shake off the dominant *gachupines*. “Rompe la cadena,” goads Valle, “[q]uebranta la peña y la / adusta greña sacuda el bronce de tu sien” (OC II 1835). Overworked and unjustly rewarded, the *indios* must shatter “la peña,” the disproportionate agrarian model favoring the *gachupines*. As the poem progresses, its tone grows increasingly more violent:

Indio mexicano  
 Mano en la mano  
 Mi fe te digo.  
 Lo primero  
 Es colgar al Encomendero,  
 Y después segar el trigo. (OC II 1835)

For Valle, it is not enough to “quema[r] las trojes del trigo,” rather, the first thing to accomplish is to “colgar al Encomendero.” In no uncertain terms, the poet seeks to incite the *indios* to revolt against Mexican society in its present state, beginning by lynching the *gachupines*, the “Encomendero[s].” Why does Valle argue so vehemently (and violently) against these landowners? As seen in the previous chapter, he dearly endorses the values of *hidalgos*—represented synecdochally by a young *marqués*—, so why, in 1922, would he seek to challenge their descendants by stridently encouraging revolution in México? Instead of disparaging the

values upheld by the *hidalgos* of the past, Valle condemns the immorality, indulgence, and impropriety of their children, the *gachupines* of the present.

Between 1908, the year *Romance de lobos*, the final play in Valle's *Las comedias bárbaras* trilogy, is published and 1922, the year *Cara de Plata*, an asynchronous prequel to the final two plays, appears, Valle's hope to preserve (and potentially restore) the *hidalgos*—"los secos hidalgos de la gotera"—has all but extinguished (OC I 711). Finally able to recognize the futility of such an endeavor, he fatalistically recounts, "[h]e asistido al cambio de una sociedad de castas (los hidalgos que conocí de rapaz), y lo que yo vi no lo verá nadie. Soy el historiador de un mundo que morirá conmigo. Ya nadie volverá a ver vinculeros y mayorazgos" (*Entrevistas* 258). The last *hidalgo*, as identified by none other than the Marqués de Bradomín, is don Juan Manuel de Montenegro, "el ultimo superviviente de una gran raza" (OC II 130). This same "gran raza" has, after several failed Carlist Wars, slowly died off only to be replaced by its insubordinate and indifferent children. The same criticisms Valle levels against the *gachupines* in México can also extend across the Atlantic to the frivolous and disobedient progeny of the *hidalgos*.

In 1904, after reading Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de estío*, José Ortega y Gasset, frustrated by Valle's exuberance towards "los escudos familiars que evocan leyendas hidalgas," carefully petitions the author to expand his literary horizons to the *plebeyo*, insisting that the time and characters invoked in *Sonata de estío* have already exhausted their utility in the present ("Sentido" 52). Ortega's literary ambitions parallel the demands generated by a society in crisis—one whose leaders have lost the inspiration to cultivate societal development. The aesthetic beauty, the elevated language, and the privileged characters that the philosopher detects in *Sonata de estío* run contrary to the rapidly diminishing social realities of the Spanish empire at

the opening of the twentieth century. Only six years after the failure of the Spanish-American War, Ortega seeks to reboot Spain's aristocracy, not by invoking figures from the past, but by intellectually inspiring a select minority of leaders in the present. Four years later, Valle seems to take Ortega's advice to heart by writing the tragic story of the Montenegro clan, contrasting the rise and fall of *hidalguismo* with the present demands for an enlightened aristocracy. In *Las comedias bárbaras*, Valle describes Juan Manuel de Montenegro's collapse and tragic end when, upon bequeathing his property to his unruly and ungrateful sons, he recognizes the need for a new, active nobility. Instead of imitating the miserly ways of his forbearers, he recklessly attempts to share his relinquished wealth with the poor.

As an allegorical figure, Montenegro finds himself caught up in a society in transition. The feudalistic model, kept afloat by the strong tradition of *hidalguismo* and latent aristocracy, slowly makes way for a bickering bipartisanship, a far cry from a democratically-minded, enlightened oligarchy, as outlined and endorsed by Ortega y Gasset.<sup>2</sup> This transformative process, according to Roberta L. Salper, initiates at the outset of the second play in the trilogy:

*Aguila de blasón y Romance de lobos* comprenden una sutil interpretación del proceso de disolución de la estructura feudal medieval tal que, a medida que tracemos la caída personal que experimentaría Don Juan Manuel desde su supuestamente inexpugnable posición de señor feudal, podremos apreciar mejor

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<sup>2</sup> This type of leadership, philosophically described by Ortega and theatrically suggested by Valle, never develops into a fully articulated, practical model for Spanish politics. At best, Ortega's observations prove too idealistic whereas Valle's depiction too conclusive. As outlined in my first chapter, actual Spanish politics at the close of the nineteenth century swing between burgeoning liberalism and traditional conservatism. By the time the Spanish Civil War erupts, the nation's stumbling political model has oscillated radically from a short-lived First Republic (1873-1874), a failed Bourbonic Restoration (1874-1931), and a doomed Second Republic (1931-1939). With the rise of Franco and the *Falange* at the outset of the Civil War (1936), Spain enters into a long period of totalitarian control.

cómo ese desmoronamiento personal viene a ser en muchos sentidos el resultado de aquel otro desmoronamiento social.<sup>3</sup> (167)

As a decadent *hidalgo*, Montenegro's struggle with and eventual demise at the hands of his sons, the recalcitrant remainder of a nobility gone sour, allegorically represents the difficult process of political transition that has already begun at a national level.

In this regard, Valle's insistence for a Mexican revolution can, given Spanish society's gradual transformation into a passive, artistically insensitive mass mentality, also be applied to Spain itself. Along with the disappearance of the *hidalgos*, their children—Ortega y Gasset identifies them as “señorito[s] satisfecho[s]”—are characterized by apathetic, seemingly ignoble qualities. The attitude of the rising generation becomes one and the same with the conforming will of the masses. Politically, aesthetically, and ideologically unproductive, such an attitude discourages societal growth and transformation. In a landscape as politically tumultuous as early twentieth-century Spain, the mentality of the masses prevents national stability and confidence.

Valle's dramatic trilogy, *Las comedias bárbaras* responds to this culturally anemic situation by depicting the collapse of *hidalguía* and the rise of an active nobleman—a politically committed and powerfully willed figure; the inverse of the “señorito satisfecho”—through the dramatic transformation of Juan Manuel de Montenegro. Traditionally read as the fall of late feudalism and the rise of democracy, Montenegro's metamorphosis can also allude to a type of social transition—from mass mentality to active aristocracy—when analyzed philosophically. Drawing from the theory of the masses developed by José Ortega y Gasset, this chapter strives to conceptualize Valle's philosophical commitment in his dramatic trilogy, *Las comedias bárbaras*,

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<sup>3</sup> Salper is not alone in this assertion, as Gaspar Gómez de la Serna confirms in 1969: “[l]a [serie] de las *Comedias bárbaras* no es sino la historia del fin de esa raza de los hidalgos, y todos los *barbarismos* que ese último tipo de hidalgo lleva consigo, no hacen sino acentuar el tono epopéyico, es decir, el sentido histórico-social que semejante fin representa” (92).

as an allegory of the cave. By using literal and figurative caves in *Las comedia bárbaras*, Valle repurposes an episode from Plato's *Republic* and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in order to convey a message of decadence and renewal. His objective, to restore societal prestige and nobility, requires a total divestment of *hidalguismo* in order to revitalize the atrophic aristocracy and reshape it into a functional political model. In don Juan Manuel de Montenegro, one of the final *hidalgos* found in Valle's *oeuvre*, he debases a powerfully willed, stubbornly forthright nobleman and incites the masses to revolt.

## II. Mass Mentality and Ignoble Nobility

As early as 1921, José Ortega y Gasset grows increasingly concerned over a figurative illness that pervades not only Spanish society, but steadily permeates into most of modern Europe. "La sociedad española," writes Ortega, "se está disociando desde hace largo tiempo porque tiene infeccionada la raíz misma de la actividad socializadora" (*España* 77). Essentially a societal problem, national progress has stymied, from Ortega's point of view, due to the surging growth and powerful will of the masses. He reluctantly admits that "en España vivimos hoy entregados al imperio de las masas," which has resulted in, "una raza entontecida [e] intelectualmente degenerada" (*España* 78, 91). The primary issue that Ortega derives from mass culture has to do with its oversaturation of simple-minded and ultimately unconcerned folk whose collective opinion, according to the philosopher, passively determines political judgment and undermines national growth. He recognizes that "la realidad española," has become:

un atroz paisaje saturado de indocilidad y sobremanera exento de ejemplaridad.

Por una extraña y trágica perversión del instinto encargado de las valoraciones, el pueblo español, desde hace siglos, detesta todo hombre ejemplar, o, cuando

menos, está ciego para sus cualidades excelentes. Cuando se deja conmover por alguien, se trata, casi invariablemente, de algún personaje ruin e inferior que se pone al servicio de los instintos multitudinarios” (*España* 91).

In this sense, mass mentality has overwhelmed political promise in Spain. Instead of utopically pushing towards an ideal community, the national project has stalled, succumbing to the conformist wishes of the people, a “raza entontecida.”

Rather than solely blame the masses, however, Ortega also attributes national attrition towards the slow yet steady demise of the Spanish intellectual and cultural aristocracy; its “hombres ejemplares” have disappeared (*España* 91). He notes, “lo que acarrea la decadencia social es que las clases próceres han degenerado y se han convertido casi íntegramente en masa vulgar [y. . .] una sociedad sin aristocracias, sin minoría egregia, no es una sociedad” (85-86). An invisible guiding hand, a voice of reason for the people, must be controlled by a small yet powerful group of leaders selected not by democratic election, but by virtue of their inherent talent for leadership. If Spain is to have a future, argues Ortega, it must rediscover these “personalidades eminentes” and allow them to right the sinking ship of a nation that finds itself “irremediabilmente [en] su propia degeneración” (112). What happens, however, when the aristocracy, the select few who have the capacity and natural ability to rescue a politically destitute people, have also undergone this degenerative process? In other words, how can a degenerate nobility rescue a degenerate society?

The Montenegro clan in Valle’s *Comedias bárbaras*, one of the final vestiges of Spanish *hidalguismo*, consists of a tyrannical father, Juan Manuel de Montenegro, and his six obstinate sons—Cara de Plata, Pedrito, Rosendo, Mauro, Gonzalito, and Farruquiño. The unruly ways of the father, the “lobo cano,” have distilled into the disorderly conduct of his children, “lobeznos,

hijos de lobo” (OC II 275, 487). Unlike his children, however, Montenegro recognizes that his title and bloodline demand noble actions. After his eldest son, Cara de Plata, foolishly kills a peasant’s cow, Montenegro chastises him, reminding him of his aristocratic obligations:

JUAN MANUEL DE MONTENEGRO. ¡Yo quería que tú fueses un caballero  
que respondiese en todo a las obligaciones de su sangre!

CARA DE PLATA. Ya correspondo, padre.

JUAN MANUEL. Tus hermanos te pervierten con sus malos ejemplos.

Escúchame. No te pido que seas un santo, cada edad reclama lo suyo, pero no olvides las obligaciones de tu sangre, como hacen los otros perversos. (OC II 280)

Montenegro feels that Cara de Plata, unlike his brothers, has the ability to rise to his noble potential. In order to do so, however, he must fulfill his primary duties as a *hidalgo*.<sup>4</sup> As Ortega summarizes: “[e]l noble, el magistrado, el dignatario eclesiástico tiene obligación de dar a su conducta el ornato y atuendo que corresponden a su función y jerarquía” (*España* 100).

Montenegro, however, has allowed his estate to fall into ruin. His behavior is unbecoming for a member of the aristocracy; from the outset, he is described as “mujeriego y despótico, hospitalario y violento” (OC II 279). In effect, Montenegro condemns his sons for the same inadequacies that he has come to represent. Not until the final play in the trilogy, after renouncing his fortune and embracing poverty, does Montenegro realize and accept his mistakes.

Sensing that his life draws to a close, Montenegro recognizes the terrible influence he has had on his children. He laments, “¡[n]o hallo paz en la vida! ¡Fui pastor de lobos y ahora mis

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta L. Salper recognizes Montenegro’s preferential treatment of Cara de Plata as an earnest attempt to preserve his nobility: “Cara de Plata es la última esperanza que alberga don Juan Manuel (considera a sus otros hijos unos inútiles) para la perpetuación de la tradición feudal. Cara de Plata representa la única posibilidad que le queda a Montenegro de encontrar un heredero” (176).

ganados me comen! ¡Engendré monstruos y estoy maldito!” (OC II 504). During this realization, however, he also gains a profound political insight: “[h]e aprendido, al final de mis días, que todos debemos tener por lecho de muerte un muladar, y voy a él” (508). This communal *muladar* shapes Montenegro’s new political philosophy. Rather than seek refuge among his traitorous children, he discovers new meaning among the beggars, the lowest rung of the societal ladder. After a long life of perverse behavior, Montenegro has finally found a cause worth defending; his goal, at the twilight of his mortality, is to demand recompense for the poor. He instructs his beggar followers, “iré a pedir una limosna en la casa que fue mía, y si hallo la puerta cerrada la derribaré para que [entréis vosotros] con [vuestros] hijos” (513). For Montenegro, the wheel has fully turned; after a life of aristocratic indulgence, he has become the leader of a ragtag band of beggars.

At the end of *Romance de lobos*, societal privilege for Montenegro finally flattens out. Penniless after forfeiting his inheritance to his wayward sons, his claim to nobility has evaporated, only to be replaced by a powerful desire for justice, a yearning to recompense those his children have wronged. His sons’ rejection of a woman requesting money to dig a grave (a “cueva”) for her deceased husband stirs Montenegro to action:

JUAN MANUEL DE MONTENEGRO. ¡Fuiste a mi casa y encontraste cerrada la  
puerta!

LA MUJER. ¡Me echaron los canes!... ¡Pedía un bien de caridad para abrir una  
cueva!... [. . .]

JUAN MANUEL. ¡Yo cavaré la cueva para tu marido! Si faltase azada, la cavaré  
con mis manos... (OC II 513)

Sunken to the level of the masses, Montenegro gains insight into how he can effect societal transformation, starting with his own family. Determined to right these injustices, he marches off towards his disinherited home, now controlled by his miscreant sons.

Montenegro's transition from aristocrat to beggar and consequential reevaluation go against Ortega's diagnosis for societal improvement. Whereas Ortega wishes to revitalize the "minoría selecta" in order to propel Spain forward politically, Montenegro's descent from nobility catalyzes his determination to transform society (or at the very least his own family). The critical difference between Ortega and Montenegro resides in Ortega's firm belief that the aristocracy still retains a moral and cultural sense of redeeming nobility—that it represents values worthy of imitation—, while the Montenegro family, *hidalgos* descending from a long line of nobles, demonstrate time and again that their nobility is nothing but a façade. Entirely unaware of his own misgivings, Montenegro bemoans his fate: "¡[t]odos desean mi muerte, y mis hijos los primeros! Esos malvados que engendré para mi afrenta, convertirán en una cueva de ladrones, esta casa de mis abuelos. ¡Conmigo se va el último caballero de mi sangre! (OC II 364). His sons, according to Montenegro, do not uphold the special noble values that he professedly practices. Since the nobility itself, the idealized aristocracy, has fallen into disrepair, a new working definition of nobility is in order.

In 1930, Ortega formalizes his concept of the masses by providing a historical framework for its development in his work, *La rebelión de las masas*. In the text, he recognizes the dissonance between the modern representation of the word "nobleza" and its former denotation. "Es irritante," he writes, "la degeneración sufrida en el vocabulario usual por una palabra tan inspiradora como 'nobleza'" (*Rebelión* 118). What he finds so irritating has to do precisely with the stubborn passivity of the rising aristocratic generation. The inspirational, outgoing qualities

found so prominently in their forefathers have disappeared. Ortega muses, “el sentido propio, el *etymo* del vocablo ‘nobleza’ es esencialmente dinámico. Noble significa el ‘conocido’: se entiende el conocido de todo el mundo, el famoso, que se ha dado a conocer sobresaliendo de la masa anónima” (118). He equates the modern aristocratic attitude with the motives of the masses; no longer required to prove their worth, the children of nobility inertly rely on the prestige of their parents to subsist. The principal problem with such a mindset, however, is that it invites a static, empty lifestyle.

Without a vital purpose for existing (the type of challenge issued to his forbearers that, upon embracing it, ultimately proved their nobility), the “señorito satisfecho” finds himself undergoing a passive and pointless existence. Ortega condemns this form of living:

Así, en el “aristócrata” heredero toda su persona se va envagueciendo, por falta de uso y esfuerzo vital. El resultado es esa específica bobería de las viejas noblezas, que no se parece a nada y que, en rigor, nadie ha descrito todavía en su interno y trágico mecanismo; el interno y trágico mecanismo que conduce a toda aristocracia hereditaria a su irremediable degeneración.<sup>5</sup> (*Rebelión* 147)

This assertion parallels the modern aristocratic attitude to the mentality of the masses: slothful to a fault, their unwillingness to develop their own vital meaning places the sons of Montenegro into the same degenerative category as the masses. When those who lead experience the same misgivings—the moral inconsistencies, the endemic carelessness—as those they should lead,

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<sup>5</sup> Had Ortega y Gasset never read or seen *Las comedias bárbaras* upon writing this? His conviction that, “nadie ha descrito todavía [la aristocracia hereditaria] en su interno y trágico mecanismo,” belies Valle’s clear depiction of aristocratic degeneration in *Las comedias bárbaras*. Chronologically, *La rebellion de las masas* is first published as a book in 1930, although its chapters can be found scattered throughout editions of *La revista del Oeste* and *El Mundo* between 1926-1928 (Marías “Introducción” 10; Matilla “*Las comedias bárbaras*” 315, note 14). Valle’s dramatic trilogy takes 14 years to complete, with the second and third plays appearing in 1908 and 1909, respectively. It is not until 1922 that Valle publishes *Cara de Plata*, the first play in the series. From a historical perspective, it stands to reason that Ortega had, at the very least, read *Las comedias bárbaras* before writing his *Rebelión de las masas*.

there can be no hope for redemption. A new identity must be formed, one that revitalizes the individual in its fight for survival. Montenegro's descent into poverty, the forfeiture of his estate, and his determination to right past wrongs all motivate his development into a new type of active noble. No longer fettered to an atrophic aristocracy, he urges his group of beggars forward, demanding that his recalcitrant sons rectify their misguided ways.

The final scene of *Romance de lobos* depicts a resolute Montenegro leading a group of destitute followers to the doors of his former estate. His singular purpose, to divide what remains of his wealth among the poor, is met, unsurprisingly, with open hostility by his children.

Pounding on the front door, he commands:

¡Abrid hijos de Satanás! ¡Abrid estas puertas que cierra vuestra codicia! [. . .]  
 ¡Abridlas para que entren los que nunca tuvieron casa! ¡Soy yo quien después de habérselo dado todo, llego a pedir os una limosna para ellos! [. . .] ¡Vuelvo aquí para despojaros, como a ladrones, de los bienes que disfrutáis por mí! ¡Dios me alargue la vida para que pueda arrancarlos de vuestras manos infames y repartirlos entre mis verdaderos hijos! (OC II 516, 519)

There exist several ways to read this final scene: as the last, vengeful act of a spiteful parent towards his uncaring sons; as a definitive shift in the *hidalgo*-based political model championed in Spain since the early medieval era; or as a rising-up of the masses, a socially engaged, revolutionary act impelled by a transformed *hidalgo* but propelled by the beggars themselves, the lowest station in the social hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> I propose that Montenegro represents a repurposed

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Montenegro's actions can even be read as a redemptive gesture from a fallen savior, as Sumner M. Greenfield asserts: "[c]on don Juan Manuel y su séquito de pobres, Valle-Inclán intenta reproducir una versión tardía de una épica cristiana arquetípica. El mayorazgo parece un mesías militante, un guerrero cristiano que capitanea su hueste de harapiento seguidores contra un tirano injusto y cruel en una cruzada por la victoria y la justicia" (*Anatomía* 94).

*hidalgo*. In order to retain a viable political position in his society, he must redefine his nobility. In the words of Ortega, he must become active: “[p]ara mí, nobleza es sinónimo de vida esforzada, puesta siempre a superarse a sí misma, a trascender de lo que ya es hacia lo que se propone como deber y exigencia” (*Rebelión* 119). This new type of nobility, an engaged, effortful approach to overcoming oneself, rejects the passive stance of the modern aristocracy. In this sense, Montenegro’s transformation from an inert *hidalgo* who primarily cares for himself into an active revolutionary who philanthropically focuses on the needs of others also represents a new, viable philosophical model for aristocratic behavior.

Uniquely, but not without philosophical precedent, such transformation occurs in *Romance de lobos* only after Montenegro emerges from two literal caves. He first seeks shelter from the howling wind in the cavernous ruins of a quarry just outside of Flavia-Longa. Hidden in the recesses of the enclosure, Montenegro discovers a pack of weary, hungry, and downtrodden beggars, the same group of people he guides to his former estate at the end of the play.

Portentously, he counsels them:

El día en que los pobres se juntasen para quemar las siembras, para envenenar las fuentes, sería el día de la gran justicia. [. . .] ¡Y las mujeres, y los niños, y los viejos, y los enfermos, gritarán entre el fuego, y vosotros cantaréis y yo también, porque seré yo quien os guíe! Nacisteis pobres, y no podréis rebelaros nunca contra vuestro destino. La redención de los humildes hemos de hacerla los que nacimos con ímpetu de señores cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias.

(OC II 466)

Clearly a case of dramatic foreshadowing, Montenegro’s prophecy implies that his metamorphosis, from a passive *hidalgo* into an active nobleman, will incite the poor to revolt

against the degenerated feudalistic system. His final words—“[l]a redención de los humildes hemos de hacerla los que nacimos con ímpetu de señores cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias”—mark the beginning of his transformation. Once his mind opens to the plight of the poor—i.e., once he becomes enlightened to their suffering and eager to make a difference—, he will play a significant role in the revolt of the masses. His final illumination happens only after Montenegro again enters a cave, *la cueva* of Fuso Negro, this time to die.

The second critical step in Montenegro’s conversion into an active noble requires that he slough off his former self, renouncing his fortune, his estate, even his lineage, in order to lead the masses. The death of his wife, doña María, triggers a process of self-debasement wherein Montenegro progressively divests himself of his aristocratic privileges. Lamenting to *el Capellán*, María’s close companion, Montenegro confesses, “[n]o tengo más que un pecado... ¡Uno solo que llena toda mi vida!... He sido el verdugo de aquella santa con la impiedad, con la crueldad” (OC II 491). In order to make restitution for his sin, Montenegro bestows his inheritance upon his misbehaving sons. At the end of the third scene of *Romance de lobos*, he realizes that, “[l]a muerte ya marcó mis horas, y para poder morir en paz, he abandonado a mis hijos todo cuanto tenía” (508). Sinking into the darkness of “una caverna socavada por el mar,” Montenegro, “espera la muerte como un viejo león” (508).<sup>7</sup> Rather than embrace death in Fuso

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<sup>7</sup> This is only the second time in the trilogy that the narrator refers to Montenegro with the metaphor of a lion (cf. III.2 of *Águila de blasón* when the *hidalgo*, resisting the entreaties of his children to record a will, exclaims, “¡[y]o soy león! ¡Yo soy tigre!” (OC II 383)); his usual allegorical pair, as enforced by the title of the play, is the wolf. I will argue that the barbaric quality of *Las comedias bárbaras*, can be characterized through the bestial qualities of the wolf—a vicious, nocturnal, and entirely self-interested creature—, particularly as exemplified by Montenegro’s dishonorable children. By plying a new animal metaphor (the lion in place of the wolf) for Juan Manuel, the playwright implies that he has abandoned the barbaric quality of his decaying aristocratic identity. In line with Ortega’s vision for nobility, this shift also marks the transition of Spanish society, from feudalism to an enlightened aristocracy.

In *Los cruzados de la causa*, published in 1907, only one year before *Romance de lobos*, Valle employs both animal metaphors in describing the ancient *hidalgos*: “Los mayorazgos eran la historia del pasado y debían ser la historia del porvenir. [ . . . ] Vivía en ellos el romanticismo de las batallas y de las empresas que se simbolizaban en un lobo pasante o un león rapante” (OC I 711). While not entirely clear, the Marqués here seems to be referring to the heraldic symbols found on the crests of ancient nobility. For whatever reason, by using both the wolf and the

Negro's cave, however, Montenegro attains enlightenment, burning with retribution for the wrongs committed against the poor by his miserly sons, benefactors of his inheritance and now fully-invested *hidalgos*. Unwilling to heed his final command to always keep their "puertas francas y [. . .] su mano tendida hacia [los pobres]," Montenegro, full of righteous indignation, roars to his bereft followers, "[h]aré respetar mi voluntad! [. . .] se cumplirán todas las mandas que ordené. Venid conmigo, y en el umbral de mi casa me veréis pedir una limosna para vosotros" (491, 513). Even as he imparted his wealth to his sons, Montenegro now demands that they in turn fulfill their obligations as *hidalgos* by sharing their fortune with those in need.

An intriguing play of illusions and shadows, obscured by the dusky gloom of the interior of the cave, precedes Montenegro's deliberately selfless act. Entranced by a mysterious spectacle, he relates to Fuso Negro his dark vision:

JUAN MANUEL DE MONTENEGRO. Un ángel y un demonio me están  
 abriendo la sepultura, a la luz de un cirio. El ángel cava, el demonio cava...  
 Uno a la cabecera, otro a los pies... El dominio con una guadaña, el ángel con  
 una concha de oro. ¿No lo ves, hermano Fuso Negro?

FUSO NEGRO. El ángel cava, el demonio cava... ¡Bien que los veo! El demonio  
 agora enciende un cigarro con un tizón que saca del rabo.

MONTENEGRO. ¿Tú los ves, Fuso Negro?

FUSO NEGRO. ¡Sí que los veo! [. . .]

MONTENEGRO. Yo dudaba que fuese delirio de mis sentidos... Apenas distingo  
 tu sombra en esta cueva. He venido aquí para morir... Fui toda mi vida un

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lion, images he directly correlates with Juan Manuel de Montenegro, Valle sets up a peculiar leitmotif to symbolize the *hidalgos*.

lobo rabioso, y como lobo rabioso quiero perecer de hambre en esta cueva.  
(OC II 509)

While Montenegro and Fuso Negro here strike up a curiously parallel relationship—the slight difference in their names (*Monte* and *Fuso*); the nobleman identifies the beggar as his “hermano” and trusts in his word; and their surreal, yet shared vision of the digging angel and demon figures—, I want to focus on Montenegro’s confused state. Unable to discern things for what they are, his mind begins projecting oneiric sequences onto the murky shadows of the cave.<sup>8</sup> This type of imagery—a victim, shackled to the wall of a cave, left to decipher the flickering shadows cast from obscured shapes—has a clear philosophical precedent in Plato’s *Republic*.

Before advancing to the next section, it must be understood that caves play a significant role at both the literal and figurative levels in *Las comedias bárbaras*, especially in the final play, *Romance de lobos*. Besides the aforementioned caves that Montenegro visits in his transformation from *hidalgo* to active noble, Valle makes frequent comparisons during the course of the work that connect members of the Montenegro family to wolves and their estate to a cave. Both instances of caves, the literal and the figurative, have direct metaphorical meanings for the text as a whole. Following the transformative paradigm established through Montenegro’s metamorphosis from *hidalgo* to beggar, his home, the figurative “cueva de lobos,” depicts a place of ignorance and deception whereas the literally cavernous places of the poor represent opportunities for societal development and social renovation. Such portrayals parallel two famous models of the cave: the first, classical model of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and the second, more modern example of the cave of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of the relationship between Montenegro and Fuso Negro, including a brief interpretation of Montenegro’s strange vision, I direct the reader to Jorge García Gómez’s 2005 article, “Death, Truth, and Sinfulness: Of Various Characters and Scenes from Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s *Comedias bárbaras*,” particularly the end of the section titled, “Features of Various Characters and Their Relationships” (pp. 261–65).

### III. Plato's Cave

In his 1920 collection of poems titled *El pasajero*, Valle-Inclán directly identifies Plato's Allegory of the Cave with the misplaced confidence associated with reflection and recollection. In "Asterisco," the poet infers that individuals tend to believe that their future can easily be discerned by reflecting on their past; that we tend to fool ourselves into optimistically believing that our memories, selectively recalled and organized, will determine our future. He writes:

Lo que atrás le queda, delante imagina.

Viéndola, se entiende mejor la doctrina

De Platón. La bella busca en las figuras

Falsas de la luz, claridades puras.

Ciencia cabalística dicta sus posturas. (OC II 1252)

The misguiding force of what we choose to remember, "[l]a bella busca en las figuras / [f]alsas de la luz," inhibits mankind from embracing historical reality. The flow of time marches inexorably forward. The pleasures, events, and heroes of the past do not dictate what will come to be; rather, it becomes the individual's imperative to remodel itself according to the demands of the present. As Valle evocatively writes in "Rosa deshojada," the penultimate poem in *El pasajero*:

¡Adiós, ilusiones!

Ya logran mis años

Las quietas razones

De los desengaños

Perecen las glorias,

Se apagan los días,

Quedan por memorias

Las cenizas frías. (1262)

A dismal view of the past—an irretrievable, exhausted form of existence—overwhelmingly illustrates Valle’s conception of memory. Nothing more than “cenizas frías,” the illusory experiences of the past belong entirely to an unrecoverable path of nostalgia whose steps, while visible, are irretraceable. He can lucidly remember “las quietas razones,” and former “desengaños,” but their realization in the present proves impossible.

Valle connects the illusive, unproductive experience of the inhabitants of Plato’s cave with the hopeless confidence that one’s past constitutes a plausible model for survival in the present. His description of a decaying feudal society in *Las comedias bárbaras*, a form of life Montenegro at first stridently, if impossibly, strives to uphold, forms a sharp contrast with the distasteful reality of ignoble nobility; the age of the *hidalgo* has come and gone. To remain an aristocrat in the present, nominally invested with the same feudal nobility of the past, means to stagnantly accept a passive, fading existence. “Perecen las glorias,” writes Valle; “[s]e apagan los días” of feudal aristocracy (OC II 1262). For the *hidalgo*, a historical injunction manifests itself: transform—become, as Ortega urges, “activo”—or perish. In this regard, Montenegro, upon relinquishing his fortune, the material evidence of his connection with a deep, noble past, enters into a new phase of existence, one where he selflessly guides the poor. Like the unshackled philosopher of Plato’s allegory, Montenegro attains enlightenment by urging others to enter into the same path by revolting against the decaying *hidalguía* and its obsolete and unjust social order.

Plato’s timeless Allegory of the Cave, as expounded in his seventh book of *The Republic* forms an allusion to humanity’s natural proclivity towards flawed, trivial ideas; its adherence to

pre-supplied information that reflects a mere shadow of actual reality. Inside the cave reside “strange prisoners [. . . that] have been there since childhood, legs and necks fettered so they cannot move: they see only what is in front of them, unable to turn their heads because of the bonds” (227). Read metaphorically, these fetters can symbolize the constraining power of societal ignorance, a blissful way of remaining content in one’s own limited vision of the world. Projected onto a wall before the prisoners, silhouettes appear that are cast from “statues of men and other animals, made of wood and stone and all sorts of things” (227). Restricted in their ability to perceive the object from which each shadow originates, the observers must conclude that what they see is, in essence, truth: “[s]uch prisoners [. . .] would not acknowledge as true anything except shadows of artificial objects” (228). These images constitute the very components of lived experience inside the cave; the virtual accumulation of imperfect, refracted shadows by which the prisoners assemble meaning. The person carrying a statue of an animal, for instance, issues forth a sound; the prisoners then interpret that sound and associate it with the shadow cast by the statue. Image and sound fuse, attributing a sonorous quality to a discernable figure. The prisoners, left to discuss their observations, arrive at a general consensus: “if they were able to converse with one another, don’t you think they would acknowledge as things which are, the things that they saw?” (228). This never-ending procession of shadows and their accretion of visual and sonorous phenomena will eventually reach a critical mass where perception meets expectation, allowing individuals to identify their observations by transposing shadow and sound into accepted actuality.

What happens when a prisoner, perturbed by its limited perspective, questions the source of the shadows that play across the face of the wall? Plato postulates that such an individual, unsatisfied with mere silhouettes and granted sudden mobility, will seek out the cave’s exit and

confront a greater, more vibrant source of light than the shadow-casting fire of the cave. Upon securing his exit, the radiant beams of the sun would cause the viewer to shade its eyes, unable to look upon this powerful source of light. Occupying a new, truer reality, “he would feel pain in doing all this, and because his eyes were dazzled, he would be unable to discern those things yonder whose shadows he had seen before” (228). Gradually, he would become aware, his eyes focusing on and directly interpreting the shapes and objects illuminated by the sun’s rays. Plato describes the sequential process:

It would be easier first to look at shadows, next, at images in water of men and other things, and afterward at the things themselves; after this, it would be easier to contemplate things in the heaven and the heaven itself by night, and gaze at the light of the stars and the moon, than at the sun and its light by day. [. . .] Finally then, I suppose, the sun. Not appearances of it in water or in alien seats: he would be able to look at it alone by itself in its own place, and contemplate it as it is.  
(229)

From shadow, to reflection, to the object itself, the individual slowly develops an awareness of and ability to withstand its surroundings. The final perspective, a penetrating glance at the sun, completes the elucidating journey from darkness to light.

This upward movement, from the dark bowels of the cave to the brightened landscape of the external world, can allegorically compare with the pursuit of knowledge, an uplifting endeavor from the shackles of ignorance into the freedom of enlightenment. “If you assume that the ascent upward and the vision of things above is the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible place,” writes Plato, “you will not mistake my surmise” (231). While the “intelligible place,” coincides with Plato’s theoretical world of ideal Forms (i.e., a world that preserves the

immaculate idea of an object yet only permits humanity to imperfectly imitate that idea), I wish to emphasize the individual's journey: a careful progression from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge. A fugitive from the cave who has undergone this process of enlightenment, surmises Plato, will long to share what he has learned with those still imprisoned below.

The return voyage creates its own series of problems. Moving from radiant brightness to muddy darkness requires that the eyes adjust to a new setting. Plato explains, "if such a man went down again and sat upon the same seat, would not his eyes be filled with darkness, coming suddenly from the sun? [. . .] Wouldn't it be said of him that he had journeyed upward only to return with his eyes ruined, that it wasn't worth it even to try to go up?" (230). The immediate onset of darkness, coupled with the jeering from his ignorant comrades, must leave the man with regrets; if the only response is mocking ridicule, why return to tell a people accustomed to the dark that a brighter, more profound existence lies only a short distance away? Would they even believe him?

Considered allegorically, incredulity and derision result in humanity's response to any novel mode of being. "Como ahora la circunstancia no le obliga," writes Ortega y Gasset in 1930, "el eterno hombre-masa, consecuente con su índole, deja de apelar y se siente soberano de su vida" (*Rebelión* 117). With this powerful sense of self-confidence and contentedness, an overwhelming laziness, according to Ortega, enters into the mass man's mentality. Any provocations to modify, rethink, or reorient one's vital model are met with disdain or even open hostility. "La masa," continues Ortega, "arrolla todo lo diferente, egregio, individual, calificado y selecto. Quien no sea como todo el mundo, quien no piense como todo el mundo, corre el riesgo de ser eliminado" (*Rebelión* 80). An explorer who has discovered the exit and seen the sun no

longer belongs to the ‘masa,’ i.e., he no longer harbors the same ignorance and false assumptions plaguing those strapped to the wall of the cave. He can see the shadows for what they are—grossly imperfect imitations of their original counterparts—and will, in the words of Plato, “ever press on to spend [his] time above” (231). With this in mind, the return descent represents much more than a self-absorbed desire to demonstrate one’s intellectual superiority, it becomes a truly selfless act that aims to better mankind, to loosen the shackles that bind the cave-dwellers and inspire them to pursue a better path, seek out the exit, and ascend into daylight.

Montenegro’s transformation in *Romance de lobos* parallels the process of enlightenment experienced by Plato’s philosopher but adds a strong impulse towards a renovated form of Christianity. During his first visit to a cave, the beggar’s shelter in the ruinous quarry, Montenegro prophetically envisions his role in leading the poor against his recalcitrant sons. “La redención de los humildes,” predicts Montenegro, “hemos de hacerla los que nacimos con ímpetu de señores cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias” (OC II 466). Such an observation, while emphatic, also implies that the *hidalgo* has not yet experienced this transformation. He still finds himself stubbornly unable to disown his inheritance. Like the wealthy young man who inquired of Jesus Christ:

Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

And he said unto him, [. . .] if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

[. . .]

The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up:

what lack I yet?

Jesus said unto him, if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to

the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Matt. 19:16-17, 20-22)

The mesmerizing power of money and nobility prevent the young man, as they initially constrain Montenegro, from wholly embracing the Christian mandate to be absolutely charitable.

Accordingly, Montenegro's vision expands, suggesting that he will eventually become both destitute and thoroughly Christian in order to lead the poor towards their destiny: “[a]hora, entre vosotros, me figuro que soy vuestro hermano y que debo ir por el mundo con la mano extendida, y como nací señor, me encuentro con más ánimo de bandolero que de mendigo. ¡Pobres miserables, almas resignadas, hijos de esclavos, los señores os salvaremos cuando nos hagamos cristianos!” (466). The allusion to a new, vibrant form of Christianity stems from Valle-Inclán's growing incredulity of Spanish Catholicism, especially as practiced in his day. As late as 1935, Valle writes in a letter to Manuel Azaña:

Todo pueblo de romerías, como [Santiago de Compostela], es pueblo de sermones. Pero los tiempos son de poca fe, y el panegírico del Santo milagroso, dicho desde el púlpito de latines, en la iglesia parroquial, les llega menos al fondo de las conciencias que las verbas políticas y sociales de los mítines de la plaza pública. —Sin broma, creo que este pueblo es el único de España preparado para una herejía. Una gran herejía religiosa. Probablemente la revolución rusa, en lo íntimo, en lo más entrañado es una revolución religiosa.” (*Epistolario* 632)

Connecting the Russian Revolution of 1917 with a religious insurrection, Valle feels that incredulity and political activism percolate throughout the Galician capital; if left to gradually foment, such stirrings could, like Russia, lead to a revolution and, given Santiago de

Compostela's historical role as a pilgrimage site, potentially lead to religious and social reformation.

#### IV. Christian Reformation and Revaluation

As outlined in the first chapter, Valle's attitude towards the Spanish model of modern Christianity, especially by 1908, when *Romance de lobos* first appears, became definitively skeptical and sharply critical. Especially evident in his trenchantly anticlerical themes, Valle underscores the rampant religious hypocrisy of those who should lead their congregations. It comes as no wonder that, in *Cara de Plata*, the first play in the *Comedias bárbaras* trilogy, Montenegro's foil is none other than El Abad de Lantañón, a seemingly charitable figure that, by the end of the play, forms a diabolical pact in order to ensure Montenegro's downfall (OC II 325). Whereas in *Cara de Plata* Montenegro is consistently compared to the devil himself—in the final lines of the play, he fears, “[t]engo miedo de ser el Diablo!”—, the Abbot's descent into the diabolic occurs only after he is denied access through Montenegro's property in order to perform the last rites for a dying man (339).<sup>9</sup> Curiously similar to Valle's own final dictum just before his death—“[q]uiero despojar el acto de mi muerte de toda sombra de ceremonia. . . . Que no se publiquen esquelas . . . Que se deposite mi cuerpo en un féretro modesto y que en ningún momento haya ostentación en las exequias. Que el entierro sea civil . . . ni cura discreto, ni fraile humilde, ni jesuita sabihondo”—, Montenegro, by barring passage through his estate, ensures that a luckless soul, much like the dying Valle himself, does not place its fate wholly into the

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<sup>9</sup> As I will explain in the following section, this overweening determination to subordinate the will of others—particularly religiously emblematic figures—strongly parallels a central characteristic of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

hands of a corrupted member of the clergy (qtd. in Lima *Valle-Inclán* 362).<sup>10</sup> The contrasting development between by El Abad and Montenegro—the latter begins the trilogy associated with the devil (but by the end of *Romance de lobos* transforms into a “cristiano”) whereas the former, only dramatically present in *Cara de Plata*, transitions from a selfless priest into a vengeful schemer who seeks retribution through a diabolical alliance—also reflects the societal revolution, conjoined by religious reformation, that Valle allegorically alludes to with Montenegro’s movement from self-interested *hidalgo* into active noble.

Another religious figure that appears in *Las comedias bárbaras*, albeit strangely aloof from the subterfuge and corruption typically associated with such characters in Valle’s dramatic compositions, is *el capellán*, don Manuelito. Unlike El Abad de Lantañón, don Manuelito has a recurring role throughout each of the plays as the religious counselor and personal confidant of doña María, Montenegro’s estranged wife. Beginning in *Águila de blasón*, he sympathizes with Montenegro who laments:

JUAN MANUEL DE MONTENEGRO. Ya no hay hombres como nosotros,  
capaces de morir por una idea. Hoy los enemigos, en vez de odiarse, se dan la  
mano sonriendo.

DON MANUELITO. ¡Acabóse nuestra raza!

MONTENEGRO. ¡Así se hubiese acabado!... Pero es lo peor que degenera. ¡Yo  
engendré seis hijos que son seis ladrones cobardes! (OC II 386)

Such a statement—“[y]a no hay hombres como nosotros”—implies that Montenegro esteems Manuelito on a similar level as himself. He sees *el capellán* as an integral figure that follows an

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<sup>10</sup> A reliable description of this anticlerical vignette is difficult to ascertain. Unsurprisingly, critics have latched onto the scene for its audacious and irreverent quality. Other sources where we find the heretical asseveration include Rubia Barcia’s *Mascarón de proa* (p. 57) and Carlos G. Reigosa’s “El esperpento final” (p. 91).

older, more honorable code of conduct, when *hidalgos*, “respondi[eron] a las obligaciones de su sangre” (280).<sup>11</sup> That there remains a stalwart priest, even in a time when, as Fuso Negro disparagingly describes it, “[t]odo anda mal. El mundo va descaminando,” demonstrates that things are not as they were; as an exception to the corruption Valle continually associates with the clergy, Manuelito represents, as does Montenegro, the last of his kind (OC II 307).

A third religious figure emerges in *Las comedias bárbaras*: don Farruquiño, Montenegro’s fifth wayward son. Unlike his brothers, Farruquiño aspires to become a clergyman. His first appearance in *Águila de blasón* identifies him as a seminary student: “Don Farruquiño lleva manteo y tricornio, clásica vestimenta que aún conservan los seminaristas en Viana del Prior” (OC II 387). After visiting the home of La Pichona, the local prostitute, with his brother, Cara de Plata, Farruquiño, as expected of a corrupt priest, attempts to seduce her: “[t]anto me conmueven tus quejas que estoy dispuesto a consolarte. Vamos a deshacer esa cama, Pichona” (414). Unsurprisingly, his seductive efforts fall short as Pichona only has eyes for his brother, Cara de Plata. Beyond flirtation, Farruquiño further derides his religious aspirations in *Romance de lobos*, when he attempts to steal any items of value left over in the chapel where his

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<sup>11</sup> Don Manuelito represents one of the few religious figures in Valle’s literary world that escapes the corruptive influence of his sharp anticlericalism. Unlike Manuelito, nominally religious figures—the pilgrim in *Flor de santidad*, Pedro Gailo, the parish priest in *Divinas palabras*, and, as has been observed, el Abad de Lantañón in *Las comedias bárbaras*, among many others—all have inexcusable character flaws expose them as religious hypocrites.

Alternatively, the fact that don Manuelito is constantly found accompanying doña María seems to suggest that there is something more, beyond spiritual guidance, that *el capellán* provides for Montenegro’s wife. Indeed, as seen in the first chapter, priestly promiscuity was not uncommon at the time. While Pedro Alonso de Diego González repudiates any sexual connection between don Manuelito and doña María, he recognizes the inconsistencies of the Abbot and Farruquiño:

En ambos casos vemos sendos componentes aristocráticos en los sacerdotes, pero al lado del hidalgo de Lantañón se verá que su nobleza está teñida de cinismo, hipocresía y debilidad. Además, los personajes eclesiásticos aparecen también con cierta ambigüedad sexual, pues la castidad (casi siempre rota, pero de manera menos franca que la fidelidad conyugal del vinculero), la figura del ama (unas veces joven concubina, y otras veces anciana parienta), y su cercanía a la voluntad de las débiles mujeres les hacen extraños a la moral machista de Montenegro, sin contar que la moral sexual católica en las mujeres es la gran enemiga de los instintos promiscuos viriles, representados por el hidalgo. (57-58)

Regardless of the apparently innocent relationship between the *capellán* and Montenegro’s wife, it would prove worthwhile to further investigate their interactions.

mother's corpse lays in wake.

Unaware of his father's intent to finally surrender his fortune, Farruquiño, ever devising disreputable ways to increase his wealth, sneaks into the locked chapel to divest it of anything of worth.<sup>12</sup> Confiding to his brother, don Pedrito, that “[h]an olvidado las alhajas de la capilla,” Farruquiño makes a plan to, “conservar los vasos sagrados para dedicarlos al culto. Hay que salvar el sacrilegio” (OC II 468-69). His actions demonstrate the lengths to which Farruquiño will go, including robbing the sacristy where his mother's body decomposes, in order to acquire money. These two cardinal sins—lechery and avarice—form two historical complaints lodged against the Church during the nineteenth century, with the frequent and unexpectedly accurate accusations of clerical concubinage and the popular logic that instigated Mendizábal's 1835 policy of *desamortización*.<sup>13</sup> While each of Montenegro's children depicts the shortcomings of a decaying aristocracy, Farruquiño's priestly overtures, particularly his libido and greed, allegorize a priesthood that has lost its way by descending into practices it allegedly condemns; in coupling decadent nobility with clerical disobedience, Valle dramatically creates a moldering society whose past symbols of grandeur and power have steadily diminished.

## V. Nietzsche's Spanish Reception at the Turn of the Century

By and large, societal decadence frames the thoughts of many authors of Spain's *Generación del 98*. Within that general framework, specific aspects—such as degenerate nobility and anticlericalism—form the subject of various novels, plays, and short stories. Pío Baroja, a

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<sup>12</sup> Without approving of Farruquiño's actions, one can also infer that Montenegro's reluctance to share his wealth with his sons indirectly leads them to commit such heinous deeds. Ironically, Montenegro's initial niggardly treatment of his sons, the same crime he later accuses them of committing against the beggars, sets a terrible precedent. Thus, one could potentially argue that their uncharitable actions at the end of *Romance de lobos* result from their father's poor example of generosity.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on instances of clerical concubinage and Mendizábal's *desamortización*, I refer the reader to my first chapter, particularly section V, “An Incurable Clergy.”

contemporary of Valle-Inclán, ironically lambasts aristocratic infidelity and priestly waywardness in his 1902 novel, *Camino de perfección*. In the novel's fifth chapter, the protagonist, a disillusioned youth named Fernando Ossorio, finds himself mingling with his cousins, inheritors—much like the sons of Montenegro—of their father's fortune and, consequently, members of the decadent aristocracy. As Fernando travels with his cousins through the streets of the city, they watch people interact with one another. From their observations, Baroja ironically jabs at the lascivious character of the rising nobility: “‘esta sociedad aristocrática,’ dijo sentenciosamente el [primo de Fernando], ‘está muy bien organizada. Es la única que tiene buen sentido y buen gusto. Los maridos andan golfeando con una y otra, de acá para allá’” (24). Further, he suggests that the “aspecto místico” of one of the women is the result of an illicit relationship with a bishop: “[y]a te habrás fijado en el aspecto místico que tiene la mayor de las hermanas. [. . .] Dicen que tiene ese aspecto tan espiritual desde que se acostaba con el obispo” (25). Fernando's world, replete with sexual promiscuity and priestly immorality, sickens and disinterests him. He chooses to embark on a journey in order to seek out a new moralistic model. As Luis Landinez notes in 1961, “[Fernando] anda por la vida, por la dura e hiriente vida española de hace cincuenta años, sin norma ni sentido, alguien diría para encontrarse, en el fondo para huir de sí mismo. Ha hecho tabla rasa—siguiendo el consejo de Nietzsche—de la vieja tabla de valores morales, pero no se ha creado una nueva” (117). In his search, Fernando meets several figures, each of which epitomizes a certain philosophy. Most pertinent to this chapter, he encounters Max Schulze, a fervent admirer of Friedrich Nietzsche.

At the end of his 1895 *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche famously calls for a reevaluation of values. Disturbed by what he perceives to be “the extremest thinkable form of corruption,” he argues that Christianity, due to its strict adherence to an incapacitating set of arbitrary morals,

has “made of every value a disvalue, of every truth a lie, of every kind of integrity a vileness of soul” (198). At the core of Nietzsche’s vital philosophy is mankind’s natural ability to assume control of its own individual life; the moral statutes enforced by Christian doctrine and teaching inhibit one’s dominance of self and, as such, must be eliminated.<sup>14</sup> Max Schulze, speaking with Fernando Ossorio, praises Nietzsche in the following terms: “es difícil de representarse un hombre de naturaleza más ética que él; difícilísimo hallar un hombre más puro y delicado, más irreprochable en su conducta. Es un mártir” (64). Subverting the traditional religious symbol of a martyr, Baroja implies that Nietzsche, in rejecting Christian morality, whose namesake, according to Schulze, “produj[o] la decadencia de la Humanidad,” also outlines a cause worth dying for—namely, the revaluation of values (64).

Interestingly, few Spanish writers at the turn of the century fully understood the complete ramifications of Nietzsche’s thought. As Paul Ilie explains, “Nietzsche’s imprint stood out clearly on specific areas: a pessimistic youth, supercilious groups with pretensions to exclusiveness, vulgarized ‘Nietzschean’ styles of thinking” (83). Groups such as these could only mimic the philosopher’s language, relying on an “imitation of his passion, iconoclastic prose, and flair for metaphor” (83). Whereas Baroja, in his typical satirical manner, creates a Nietzschean sycophant in Max Schulze, Clarín, as Ilie remarks, “examined Nietzsche’s persuasive individuality in the context of vested attitudes that resisted its impetus” (83). Unlike some of his contemporaries, Clarín distills a powerfully religious message from the German

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<sup>14</sup> In the 1886 preface, “A Critical Backward Glance,” to his 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche rhetorically asks, “As for morality, [. . .] could it be anything but a will to deny life, a secret instinct of destruction, a principle of calumny, a reductive agent—the beginning of the end?—and, for that very reason, the Supreme Danger? Thus it happened that in those days, with this problem book, my vital instincts turned against ethics and founded a radical counterdoctrine, slanted esthetically, to oppose the Christian libel on life. (11)

philosopher's nihilistic neologisms. "No es filósofo sistemático Nietzsche," writes Clarín in 1900, only one month after Nietzsche's death:

Muchos deístas que los son por puro *psitacismo*, pueden aprender en este *ateo* a comprender y sentir a Dios. Cuando, en *Más allá del bien y del mal*, creo, nos habla de la angustia y el terror del que *ha matado a Dios*, aparece sublime Nietzsche en aquel *misticismo negativo*; y nos revela, mejor que muchos apologistas vulgares, todo lo que es para el alma y su equilibrio la creencia en la explicación del mundo por *lo divino*...<sup>15</sup> (403)

Apparently Clarín, like Valle-Inclán, recognizes the pious insensitivity of his time and counterintuitively urges a spiritual reading of Nietzsche's most religiously reprehensible ideas.

Instead of unabashed atheism, Clarín detects a strain of esoteric knowledge in Nietzsche's writings. After all, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the German philosopher describes the accumulation of knowledge as nothing short of liberating: "[a]s his intellectual sight and insight grow stronger, the distances and, as it were, the space surrounding a man increase: his world becomes more profound; new stars, new images and riddles keep coming into view" (51). This knowledge, when applied to the societal maladies plaguing Spain at the turn of the century, harmonizes individual experience with the metaphysical by demanding a reevaluation of values. The moral obsolescence of Spanish society exhibited by the dominant mass mentality and religious hypocrisy resonates well with what Nietzsche outlines as: "[o]ur Virtues? Probably even we still have our virtues, four-squared virtues, the ones for which we hold our grandfathers in esteem, but also a little at a distance" (109). Nietzsche's call for reevaluation as a result of moral meaninglessness forms an assertive response to a society overrun with misbehaving

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<sup>15</sup> I am especially indebted to Dr. Ilie's 1964 study for referencing Clarín's short "Palique" in the September 1900 issue of *Madrid cómico*.

aristocrats and impious clergymen. For Clarín, as it must be for Valle-Inclán himself, the ‘death of God’ represents nothing less than an opportunity to renew and revitalize a dilapidated moral order.<sup>16</sup>

## VI. Zarathustra’s Cave

The following section divides my analysis of Zarathustra into two halves. The first subsection will consider Nietzsche’s protagonist by forming strong connections between *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Essentially, I will argue that Nietzsche, referring back to the theme of liberation and illumination found in Plato, depicts the solitary experience of the enlightened individual, particularly in the face of public ridicule and derision. Zarathustra’s selfless efforts to share his insights to an uncaring people follows the same logic of Plato’s allegory; whereas Plato portrays prisoners physically shackled to the wall of a cave, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra encounters overwhelming mass apathy, a figurative imprisonment, in the marketplace. At this point, the two philosopher’s interpretations of the cave diverge: for Plato, it represents an area of ignorance and futility; for Zarathustra, it is the locus for enlightenment. From the mouth of his cave, Zarathustra gains insight of the *Übermensch* and the eternal return and, inspired by the sun’s generous warmth, sets out to share this knowledge with his fellowmen.

The second subsection will address Valle’s insertion of Zarathustra into his *esperpento*, *Luces de Bohemia*, and reflect on the discrepancies between Nietzsche’s altruistic protagonist and Valle’s greedy bookseller. Whereas the setting (1920 Madrid) and figures found in *Luces de Bohemia* coincide with the marketplace mentality present in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Valle, like other writers at the turn of the century, repurposes Nietzsche’s intensely cynical amorality into a

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<sup>16</sup> For further elaboration on Valle-Inclán’s use of the ‘death of God,’ I direct the reader to my first chapter, “A Setting Son: Religious Decay and Secularization in Spain,” particularly section VI, “The Death of God.”

diagnosis for the cultural misgivings of his present-day. His brutally satiric portrayal of Zarathustra, a figure already converted to mass morality, underscores Valle's earnest push towards cultural destruction and subsequent renewal. In a parallel vein of thought, Montenegro's economic and aristocratic debasement in *Las comedias bárbaras* suggests, in dramatic form, the cyclical process of societal demolition and restoration that Valle seeks to initiate in his *esperpentos*.<sup>17</sup>

## VI. 1. Nietzsche's Zarathustra

Friedrich Nietzsche inverts Plato's allegory in his 1883-85 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. While the travelers move in different directions—Plato's goes up whereas Nietzsche's goes down—, both allegories ply similar metaphors in describing mankind's fate. Instead of climbing upwards towards the cave's exit in order to achieve enlightenment, Zarathustra, the main character and prophetic voice of the work, descends from his mountainous cave in order to “bestow and distribute until the wise among human beings have once again enjoyed their folly, and the poor once again their wealth” (3). Indeed, the point of revelation, where the sun's radiance freely emits “happiness,” “wisdom,” and “bliss” to the protagonist is the cave itself, Zarathustra's mountaintop refuge (3). Addressing the sun, he acknowledges, “[f]or ten years you have come up here to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of this route without me, my eagle and my snake. But we waited for you every morning, took your overflow from you and

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche's Zarathustra acknowledges this movement, from high to low, over to under, as a primary reason why he loves humanity:

Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss.  
A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still.  
What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *going under*.  
I love those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over. (7)

blessed you for it” (3). Directionally, both Plato and Nietzsche follow the same upward trajectory towards illumination. Likewise, their areas of ignorance—i.e., the places of public benightedness—occupy a similar, lower plane. Represented as a cave by Plato, the town marketplace in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where goods and resources are exchanged, manifests profound ignorance and incredulity.

Indeed, after sharing his message of mankind’s potential to become an *Übermensch*, i.e., an integral figure that continuously and authentically wills its own existence, Zarathustra finds himself, like Plato’s philosopher, in a similarly discouraging situation: “they do not understand me, I am not the mouth for these ears” (9). Further, he realizes that his audience, “look[s] at me and laugh[s], and in laughing they hate me too. There is ice in their laughter” (11). Even as the cave-dwellers in Plato’s allegory mock and ridicule the returning enlightened figure, so do the marketplace townspeople deride Zarathustra for his revelatory statements. Here occurs a separation in metaphors between Plato and Nietzsche. While Plato’s cave is comparable to a life lived without meaning, to a place where dancing shadows constitute one’s accepted reality—not unlike the marketplace in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—, Zarathustra’s cave depicts a form of existence overflowing with significance, to a zone glowing with light, a nodal point for ‘higher’ men.

In the fourth book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the cave becomes a place of gathering for individuals distressed by the pressures of existence. Nine persons—a soothsayer, a pair of kings, a bleeding man, a magician, a priest, the ugliest human being, a voluntary beggar, and Zarathustra’s own shadow—come in search of refuge from a world deaf to their misfortune. While each character faces unique ordeals, Zarathustra directs each one towards his cave, entreating them that, “[i]n my realm no one shall come to harm; my cave is a safe harbor” (212).

These outcasts, driven out of society by their inability to assimilate accepted societal norms, find sanctuary in Zarathustra's cave. "[A]lready we have ceased our cryings of distress," remarks the king, "[a]lready our minds and hearts stand open and are delighted. Little is missing and our spirits will become spirited" (227). Unlike their harsh treatment from the outside world, in Zarathustra's cave they discover hope, nourishment, and purpose. Identified as "the *great* hope" by his guests, Zarathustra's words instill confidence and provide meaning to their lives (228). He teaches his followers of the *Übermensch*, an evolutionary step in mankind's transformation from the merely human into the over-human. Reiterating his earlier message, "[h]uman being is something that must be overcome," Zarathustra explains that mankind must shake off its present subservient character, shackled, as he argues, by "the sand of heavenly things," by looking beyond the present moment to the future (5, 21). In accepting his invitation and arriving at the cave, his visitors have taken the first transitional step towards the *Übermensch*. "You are mere bridges," teaches Zarathustra, "may higher people stride across you! You represent steps—so do not be angered by the one who steps over you into *his* height!" (229). Their willingness to embrace their role in helping to shape the *Übermensch* demonstrates that they have liberated themselves from some of the traditional bindings that keep humanity anchored down as "little people" (233).

Zarathustra, as does Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, frowns on the small-minded virtues engulfing European thought during the late nineteenth century. He laments that "today the little people have become ruler: they all preach surrender and resignation and prudence and industry and consideration and the long etcetera of little virtues" (233). Similar to Ortega y Gasset's mass mentality, the endemic societal problem characterized by indifference and futility that courses throughout the modern world during the beginning of the twentieth century,

Zarathustra targets the larger issue of a dilapidated moral code. His principal complaint has to do with the fact that the people still adhere to a system of virtues that, by the end of the nineteenth century, is now defunct and obsolete. Zarathustra's conclusion—a notion that he realized after much mountain-top contemplation— that “God is dead!” reasserts and emphasizes this point (5). Whereas Nietzsche would forego any new religious order in favor of a constant striving towards the *Übermensch*, Valle-Inclán, along with many other writers from turn-of-the-century Spain, found his trenchant nihilism spiritually invigorating.<sup>18</sup> On Nietzsche's influence on Valle-Inclán, Gonzalo Sobejano writes, “[é]ste había hecho ver el significado vitalmente positivo de lo que desde el punto de vista cristiano pasa por vicio, corrupción y decadencia” (*Nietzsche* 215). Through Nietzsche's disqualification of conventional morality, writers such as Valle-Inclán could diagnose the moral inadequacies of their generation, taking a hard look at the Church in its present state by comparing its value system with what preceded it and, given the poor ethical standard set by the Church at the time, call for a reevaluation of Christianity (as opposed to a Nietzschean transvaluation).

Montenegro's charitable transformation in *Romance de lobos* reiterates a familiar pattern of moral insufficiency and hypocrisy in the rising noble class. Montenegro begins the trilogy as a powerful *hidalgo*, capable of preventing El Abad de Lantañón from crossing his estate (and thereby condemning a man to die without receiving his last rites) by his sheer force of will. “Know that a noble person stands in everyone's way,” mockingly writes Nietzsche (*Zarathustra* 31). In a sense, Montenegro's portrayal in *Cara de Plata* resembles a Nietzschean *Übermensch*,

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<sup>18</sup> Such writers include Azorín, who claims that, “Nietzsche en aquel *misticismo negativo* [. . .] nos revela, mejor que muchos apologistas vulgares, todo lo que es para el alma y su equilibrio la creencia en la explicación del mundo por *lo divino* . . .” (403); Enrique Sánchez Torres, who, according to Gonzalo Sobejano, finds that “veréis en Nietzsche la plena confirmación de Cristo, hecho por un hombre de grandes deseos . . . atrofiados” (*Nietzsche* 97); and Ángel Sánchez Rivero, who, writes Sobejano, feels that “las ideas de Nietzsche promueve[n] la inquieta búsqueda de Dios” (*Nietzsche* 616).

able to accomplish whatever he wills—he prohibits the Abbot from passing through his lands, he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge his children’s demands for their inheritance, and, claiming *derecho de pernada*, abducts Sabelita, his son’s bride-to-be—, there is virtually no limit to what he can do; if he wills it, he does it. As Gonzalo Sobejano explains, Montenegro “no admite otra autoridad que la suya personal [. . .], deplora la degeneración de la especie y recuerda en extremo al Nietzsche de la moral de los fuertes” (*Nietzsche* 221). As the plays progress, however, Montenegro’s power wanes on multiple fronts: the gradual weakening of late Spanish feudalism, his eventual capitulation to his sons’ constant entreaties, and his advancing age. By the time we arrive at *Romance de lobos*, Montenegro has succumbed to the pressures of his society and his personal ambitions become supplanted by the will of his children, an aristocratic version of the masses. “¡Fui pastor de lobos,” exclaims the expiring *hidalgo*, “y ahora mis ganados me comen!” (OC II 504). From a prominent position of authority, Montenegro sinks into social insignificance.

This movement from high to low parallels the return voyage of Plato’s philosopher as he journeys back into the depths of the cave, the mountainous descent of Zarathustra as he seeks to share his knowledge of the *Übermensch*, and another, more cryptic instruction from Zarathustra about overcoming humanity: what goes up must invariably go down. “One day you will no longer see your high,” he explains, “and your low will be all too near. [. . .] You hurled yourself high, but every hurled stone must—fall” (*Zarathustra* 47, 124). From the depths, one can only look upward: “I dwell at the foot of my height; how high are my peaks? No one has yet told me. But well do I know my valleys” (116). It becomes an individual’s responsibility to respond to and engage in this cyclical pattern, leaping over and moving under societal challenges that inhibit personal growth. What must not occur, however, is self-satisfied stagnancy; one must

constantly assert one's will in order to redeem the past. Otherwise, it becomes far too easy to slink into complacency and cultural inactivity by passively accepting the will of the masses. "To redeem those who are past and to recreate all 'it was' into 'thus I willed it!'" remarks Zarathustra, "only that would I call redemption" (110). Montenegro's transition from powerful *hidalgo* to active noble follows this scheme of high to low.

The key to Montenegro's transformation has to do with his decision to abandon his former estate and title and eventually embark on a new mission of self-discovery and authentication. In a sense, by defending the rights of the downtrodden, Montenegro reasserts his will—his exclamation, "¡[h]aré respetar mi voluntad!" resounds with conviction (513). From a rich and powerful *hidalgo*, he has become a penniless and listless beggar. The urgent need he feels to vindicate the plight of poverty reignites his resolve. From a high plane of social prestige, he sinks to a lower sphere of social disrepute, only to rise again, through the sheer force of his will, as a leader of the poor. This cyclical rising and falling reflects part of a larger process of social and historical development, notable in the demise of *hidalguismo* and rise of democracy.

## VI. 2. Valle's Zarathustra

Whereas some critics refute any direct connection between Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Friedrich Nietzsche, his portrayal of a covetous bookseller and his store, *La cueva de Zarathustra*, depicted in the second scene of *Luces de Bohemia*, uncannily implies that Valle possessed a certain familiarity with Nietzsche's 1883 text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the nominal

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<sup>19</sup> Carlos Jerez-Farrán, in his 2009 article, "Goethe y Nietzsche en *La Marquesa Rosalinda* de Valle-Inclán: apoteosis poética de un radicalismo moral," boldly states that, "Valle-Inclán, [. . .] a diferencia de la mayoría de sus contemporáneos, ni en las obras que escribió, ni en las entrevistas que concedió, ni en el epistolario que de él se ha preservado hace alusión directa al filósofo alemán" (605). Further, he argues that the scene mentioned here, "no constituye una excepción ya que podría estar aludiendo al Avesta, los libros sagrados de la religión de Zoroastro" (605). Gonzalo Sobejano's 1967 *Nietzsche en España* reinforces Jerez Farrán's observation—"Valle-Inclán no menciona ni alude a Nietzsche en ninguna ocasión"—yet also admits that, "la semejanza de pensamiento y de

similarities, the themes of religious hypocrisy and the need for reformation run throughout the scene. After don Gay, a frequent customer of Zaratustra's, arrives in the bookstore, he contrasts the religious zeal of the English with the spiritual deficiencies of the Spanish, concluding that religion in Spain must reform to respond to the inadequacies of contemporary society:

DON GAY. No hay país comparable a Inglaterra. Allí el sentimiento religioso tiene tal decoro, tal dignidad, que indudablemente las más honorables familias, son las más religiosas. Si España alcanzase un más alto concepto religioso, se salvaba.

MAX. ¡Recémosle un Réquiem! Aquí los puritanos de conducta son los demagogos de la extrema izquierda. Acaso nuevos cristianos, pero todavía sin saberlo.

DON GAY. Señores míos, en Inglaterra me he convertido al dogma iconoclasta, al cristianismo de oraciones y cánticos, limpio de imágenes milagreras. ¡Y ver la idolatría de este pueblo!

MAX. España, en su concepción religiosa, es una tribu del Centro de África.

DON GAY. Maestro, tenemos que rehacer el concepto religioso en el arquetipo Hombre-Dios. Hacer la Revolución Cristiana, con todas las exageraciones del Evangelio.

DON LATINO. Son más que las del compañero Lenin.

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expresión es innegable" (213, 218). Sobejano makes no mention of *Luces de Bohemia*'s bookseller. While less definitive, I am inclined to support Ángela Ena Bordonada who, in her brief 2006 study, *Valle-Inclán y la religión*, recognizes that, "la escena II de *Luces de Bohemia*, [tiene] como escenario la librería de Zaratustra (la procedencia nietzscheana del nombre del librero no es gratuita)" (52). Further, John Lyon, in his *The Theatre of Valle-Inclán*, writes that, "[i]n scene 2, the name of the bookseller, Zaratustra, and the reference to his shop as a 'cueva' are clearly parodies of Nietzsche" (124). Following in the same vein as Viriato Díaz-Pérez's brief 1904 satirical piece, "Zaratustra en Madrid," Valle offers a rereading of Zarathustra, transforming him into a swindling bookseller rather than an impoverished derelict.

ZARATUSTRA. Sin religión no puede haber buena fe en el comercio. (OC II 883-84)

Echoing Valle's earlier sentiment that, "la revolución rusa, en lo íntimo, en lo más entrañado es una revolución religiosa," don Gay firmly believes that a religious revolution, one that places spiritual values far above political maneuvering, can save the nation (*Epistolario* 632). "He caminado por todos los caminos del mundo," he confides, "y he aprendido que los pueblos más grandes no se constituyeron sin una Iglesia Nacional. La creación política es ineficaz si falta una conciencia religiosa con su ética superior a las leyes que escriben los hombres" (OC II 884). Don Gay proposes a clear separation of powers but, unusual given the historical connectedness of the Spanish Church and State, also defends the reformed church's powerful "conciencia religiosa" and "ética superior" as overriding values that will keep political decisions in check. He supports religious revolution only because the Church, in its present, decayed form, lacks any sense of spiritual consciousness or ethical code. According to Max Estrella, Spanish "religión es una chochez de viejas que disecan al gato cuando se les muere" (884). Religious observance, according to Max, has deteriorated into rote recitations and trite tautologies. No longer focused on the "enigmas de la vida y de la muerte," it recurs to a baseless moral system, inspired and propagated by the will of the masses (884).

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche further indicates that a single, "herding-animal morality" dominates European ethics, supplanting all other forms of meaningful societal interaction. This domineering mentality, according to Nietzsche, paves the way for democratic society:

*Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality*—and thus, as we understand things, it is only one kind of human morality next to which, before which, after

which many others, and especially *higher* moralities, are or should be possible. But this morality defends itself with all its strength against such “possibilities,” against such “should be’s.” Stubbornly and relentlessly it says, “I am morality itself, and nothing else is!” Indeed, with the help of a religion that played along with and flattered the most sublime desires of the herd animal, we have reached the point of finding an ever more visible expression of this morality even in political and social structures: the *democratic* movement is Christianity’s heir.

(89)

Besides the obvious corollaries between the “herd animal” and the masses, Nietzsche argues, as does don Gay, that a deferential religion has yielded to a dominant, noncommittal sense of morality. By joining religion with politics, Nietzsche’s observation becomes especially meaningful for Spanish society; whereas don Gay urges the creation of a powerfully decisive “Iglesia Nacional,” one that underscores any political decision, Nietzsche describes the historical moral divestment of Church authority.

The second scene of *Luces de Bohemia* follows a parodic literary pattern prevalent during the turn of the century in Spain. Writers such as Pío Baroja, Viriato Díaz-Pérez, Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, and, as demonstrated in *Luces de Bohemia*, Valle-Inclán, tended to satirize, trivialize, and repurpose Nietzsche’s protagonist, Zarathustra, in different settings and occupations. Díaz-Pérez, for example, writes a short vignette of a chance meeting with “Zaratustra, un sujeto real que vive en Madrid” (4). Now retired and penniless, the poet-philosopher, whose actual name, if Díaz-Pérez can be believed, is Isidoro Polo, “casi está como le dejó Nietzsche, aunque le faltan el águila y la serpiente” (4). Accordingly, ‘Zaratustra’ still preaches about the “eterno retorno de las cosas,” but now reluctantly admits that “no hay hay superhombre que valga. La sociedad nos

trata a todos del mismo modo; es decir, mal. [. . .] Lo del superhombre, como ustedes ven, es bastante relativo. Lo único que hay de verdad, es que unos nacen para mandar y otros para ser mandados” (4). Beaten down by societal indifference, ‘Zarathustra’ no longer retains the same stubborn willpower found in Nietzsche’s text. Even the *Übermensch*, a zealous attitude he devotedly aspires to in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, has lost its vitality. Pitted against the Madrilenian poor in 1905, Zarathustra fares no better in Blasco Ibáñez.

Evidently drawing from the same source as Díaz-Pérez, Blasco Ibáñez’s version of Zarathustra portrays an elderly vagrant slowly losing his place in a rapidly progressing society.<sup>20</sup> “Soy el más antiguo del gremio,” he proudly indicates to Isidro Maltrana, the protagonist of Blasco Ibáñez’s *La horda* (1375). Ninety-four-years-old, Zarathustra elaborates:

He visto cómo la villa ha ido poco a poco ensanchándose y dándonos con el pie a los pobres para que nos fuéramos lejos. [. . .] Donde yo tuve mi primera barraca hay ahora un gran café. [. . .] Dicen que esto es el Progreso...; pero que sea igual para todos. Porque yo, señor mío, veo que de los pobres sólo se acuerda para echarnos lejos, como si apestásemos. El hambre y la miseria no progresan ni se cambian por algo mejor.<sup>21</sup> (1375-76)

For Blasco Ibáñez, Zarathustra becomes a symbol for society’s mistreatment of the poor. His “incoherencias filosóficas” surge from an inherent sense of injustice towards those of his social

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<sup>20</sup> The similarities between the characters in Díaz-Pérez and Blasco Ibáñez are too numerous to be coincidental. The name of Isidro Maltrana, the protagonist of *La horda*, differs from Zarathustra’s identity in Díaz-Pérez (Isidoro Polo) by only one letter. Further, Blasco Ibáñez’s Zarathustra is first recognized as “tío Polo” (1374). Both characters reside near cemeteries in Madrid, both are described as “traperos” (with Blasco Ibáñez playfully identifying him as “Trapatustra” (1375)), and both are forced into vagrancy by an unforgiving society.

<sup>21</sup> The resemblance between Zarathustra’s statement here and Valle’s lament for the vanishing *hidalguía* (“He asistido al cambio de una sociedad de castas (los hidalgos que conocí de rapaz), y lo que yo vi no lo verá nadie. Soy el historiador de un mundo que morirá conmigo. Ya nadie volverá a ver vinculeros y mayorazgos” (*Entrevistas* 258).) is striking. Upon recalling his past, Zarathustra confesses that “[y]o, de mozo, fui carlista,” tying him to the same cause that Valle himself identified with (1376).

stratum (1376). He, as does Montenegro after his realization of the plight of the poor, fights for social equality in a more decisive way than Valle.

Valle's 1920 version of Zarathustra, like Díaz-Pérez's 1904 and Blasco Ibáñez's 1905 renditions, satirizes Nietzsche's protagonist by reducing him to a greedy bookseller.<sup>22</sup> Instead of altruistically aiming to share his knowledge of the *Übermensch* with his fellowmen, Valle's Zarathustra cheats Max Estrella out of a collection of books but acknowledges that religious reform could restore "buena fe en el comercio" (OC II 884). In short, he takes part in the same mass "herd animal morality" condemned by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (89). Interested solely in accruing more wealth, Valle's Zarathustra adopts a moralistic attitude only when it works for his personal benefit and financial well-being. When considering his surroundings, however, he looks outward, proudly contrasting the Spanish sun with English gloom:

ZARATUSTRA. [. . .] Gente de otros países, que no siente el frío, como nosotros los naturales de España.

DON LATINO. Lo dicho. Me traslado a Inglaterra. ¿Don Gay, cómo no te has quedado tú en ese Paraíso?

DON GAY. Porque soy reumático, y me hace falta el sol de España.

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, a greedy shopkeeper who lives in a "big city" also appears in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the section titled, "On Passing By," found in the third part of the book, Zarathustra wanders into a vast city, where "great thoughts are boiled alive and cooked till they are small" (140). Suffused in the ideas of the "little people," the "big city" rejects or reformulates any form of higher thinking (233, 140). In Platonic terms, it resembles the enslaved mind of those shackled to the recesses of the cave; in Nietzschean imagery, it is an extension of the marketplace found in the first section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The ruling force of the city, as it is explained to Zarathustra, is the accumulation of wealth at others' expense: "[t]he God of Hosts is no God of gold bars; the prince proposes, but the shopkeeper—disposes"; "down there—everyone talks there, everyone is ignored there. One could ring in wisdom with bells, and the shopkeepers in the marketplace would jingle it out in pennies"; "[j]ust look at how these peoples themselves do the same as the shopkeepers; they pluck themselves the tiniest advantage from any dustpan!" (141, 148, 168). Powerful parallels exist between Nietzsche's notion of a shopkeeper and Valle's depiction of Zarathustra as a greedy bookseller. If Valle were attempting to parody Zarathustra as someone who "lived so long near the swamp that [he himself] had to turn into a frog and a toad," the city shopkeeper would serve as an excellent model (Nietzsche *Zarathustra* 142).

ZARATUSTRA. Nuestro sol es la envidia de los extranjeros. (OC II 885)

A curious parallel can be drawn between the magnetism of the Spanish sun and the objective of Plato's philosopher.

Whereas the prisoners in Plato's allegory must break free from their confines, escape the cave, and slowly adjust to the brilliance of the sun, the Spanish, according to Valle's Zaratustra, already enjoy an enviable amount of sunlight. Suffused in the warmth of the sun's rays, the Spanish have so much at their disposal and yet, as Max wonders, "¿[q]ué seríamos los españoles? Acaso más tristes y menos coléricos... Quizá un poco más tontos... Aunque no lo creo" (OC II 885). Irresponsive to the vibrant cultural and artistic abundance surrounding them, Max grows increasingly dubious that any reformation, religious or otherwise, will happen. Expressing his incredulity to his friend and former poet, *El ministro de la gobernación*, Max laments, "¡[v]ivo olvidado! Tú has sido un vidente dejando las letras por hacernos felices gobernando. Paco, las letras no dan para comer. ¡Las letras son colorín, pingajo y hambre! [. . .] Soy ciego, me llaman poeta, vivo de hacer versos y vivo miserable" (OC II 915). The public disinterest in poetry reflects a broader, more systemic problem for Spain. Zaratustra's frugal, self-absorbed attitude singularly reflects a national problem of aesthetic depreciation.

## VII. In Conclusion

As seen in his 1922 poem, "¡Nos vemos!," Valle's initial urgency for revolutionary reform in México underscores his broader sentiment towards political, religious, and cultural ineptitude in Spain at the beginning of the twentieth century. He has watched and recorded the demise of *hidalguismo* through the futile Carlist Wars; he has observed as political models shuffled in and out of power; he belongs to a society where, as Ortega y Gasset assesses, a

systematic mass mentality overwhelms autonomy and creativity of the people. In response to this decadent environment, Valle creates his dramatic trilogy, *Las comedias bárbaras*, in order to describe the fall of one of Spain's final *hidalgos*, don Juan Manuel de Montenegro, and the disreputable rise of his children, characters Montenegro identifies as "lobos," "monstrous," and "sierpes" (OC II 504). From the depths of Fuso Negro's cave, however, Montenegro experiences an intellectual and social transformation. The former model of political behavior, exemplified by late feudalism and powerful *hidalgos*, is no longer viable in Spain. In order to survive, a new democratic spirit must emerge that links the passive and unproductive masses with inspired and active leaders, reasserting the important role an intellectual, cultural, and artistic elite plays in societal development. Ortega y Gasset sketches a feasible blueprint for this political model in his *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas*. Metamorphosing into the role of a "hombre selecto," Montenegro leads a group of downtrodden beggars to the doors of his former estate, demanding that his children perform their duties as members of the aristocracy by extending charity towards the poor (Ortega *Rebelión* 119). Montenegro and his ragtag band of beggars manage to storm the *hacienda* and, in a tragic act, unsurprising given Spain's violent political history, his children murder him.

Valle dramatically portrays Montenegro's conversion from *hidalgo* to active noble by drawing from the allegorical use of caves by two philosophers: Plato and Nietzsche. Whereas Plato depicts the cave as a place of darkness and ignorance, Nietzsche's cave abounds with light and knowledge. Plying similar metaphors, the philosophers draw two very different conclusions: while Plato urges his readers to escape from the stifling confines of the cave, Nietzsche beckons his readers to climb the mountain and gain insight. Interestingly, both philosophers encourage an ascending rise toward illumination in both the literal and figurative senses. In similar fashion,

Montenegro enters the engulfing darkness of Fuso Negro's cave as a ruined *hidalgo* but emerges as a revolutionary leader. He powerfully conveys his new purpose to his immoral and literal children, "¡Vuelvo para despojaros, como a ladrones, de los bienes que disfrutáis por mí!" in order to share his wealth with those he has figuratively adopted, "¡Dios me alarga la vida para que pueda arrancar [los bienes] de vuestras manos infames y repartirlos entre mis verdaderos hijos!" (OC II 519). When understood in this light, the cave becomes a place for transfiguration for the dying *hidalgos*; from a defunct feudalistic order, it transforms Montenegro into a revolutionary representative for the oppressed.

Like many of his contemporaries, Valle trivializes Zarathustra's role but, as does Azorín, also acknowledges the spiritual and political significance of Nietzsche's prophet. From a selfless figure declaring the death of God to a disinterested public in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Valle's reconfigured dramatic character is transformed into a greedy bookseller looking to swindle Max Estrella out of his last *peseta*. Where the two figures coincide, however, has to do with the brilliance of the sun and its ability to impart new forms of knowledge to the people. Both Zarathustra and Zaratustra understand that a latent potential resides just outside of their caves—Zarathustra's cave, high up in the mountain, enjoys an exorbitant amount of sunlight whereas *La cueva de Zaratustra*, located directly in Madrid, also freely admits that its "[s]ol [. . .] es la envidia de los extranjeros" (OC II 885). Valle recognizes that Spain has the internal capacity to improve its atrophic aristocracy. In *Las comedias bárbaras*, he proposes a model to revitalize the dying *hidalgos* into socially and intellectually active nobles.

## Chapter 4 - The Phoenix's Ashes: The Death of Melodrama and the Birth of the *esperpento*

“You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes?” (Nietzsche *Zarathustra* 47)

“Todo en el mundo, para ser, requiere una chispa de lumbre” (Valle-Inclán *Romance de lobos* OC II 479)

### I. Engulfed in Flames

As a dual symbol of destruction and purification, fire occupies a unique, albeit critical, space in Valle's works. After watching as one of her sheep dies due to the curse of a wandering pilgrim in *Flor de Santidad*, the superstitious innkeeper decides to take matters into her own hands. Consulting with one of her guests, she realizes that, if she desires to save her flock, she must kill the one who cursed it. From a friend, she learns that: “una saludora le dijo [a mi amo] que cogiera la res más enferma y la echare viva en una fogata. Aquella alma que primero acudiere al oír los balidos, aquella era...” (OC I 635). The next evening, the innkeeper and her son erect a blazing bonfire and prepare to sacrifice an infected lamb: “[e]l ama asomaba con un haz de paja, y en mitad del raso encendía una hoguera: encorvada sobre el fuego, iba añadiendo brazados de jara seca, mientras el hijo, allá en el fondo arrebolado en la cocina, sujetaba las patas del cordero con la jereta de las vacas” (635-36). After throwing the sheep into the flames and listening to its poignant death cries, they expectantly wait for the pilgrim.

The connection between the pilgrim and Christ, as discussed in the first chapter, also underscores a common theme of death and rebirth found in Valle's works. The pilgrim, drawn to his demise by the massive bonfire and the burning ewe, also figuratively parallels Christ's slow march towards Golgotha. In the end, both pilgrim and savior perish. Valle directly associates fire with the pilgrim's death and, like Christ himself, promises renewal through resurrection. As

Ádega relates, “resucitará aquel santo peregrino que los judíos mataron” (OC I 642). Fire, while destructive, also provides a space for regeneration and revitalization or, as seen in *Las comedias bárbaras*, social revolution.

In the final scene of *Romance de lobos*, a huge fire roars in the hearth of the Plazo de Lantañón: “[e]n el hogar arde una gran fogata y las lenguas de la llama ponen reflejos de sangre en los rostros” (OC II 518). Montenegro, after forcing his way into his former estate, leads his band of bedraggled beggars (his “verdaderos hijos”) into the kitchen, where his miscreant sons lie in wait (518). The glowing light of the fireplace causes shadows to dance on the wall as father combats his sons:

El caballero interpone su figura resplandeciente de nobleza: los ojos llenos de furias y demencias, y en el rostro la altivez de un rey la palidez de un Cristo. Su mano abofetea la faz del segundón. Las llamas del hogar ponen su reflejo sangriento, y el segundón, con un aullido, hunde la maza de su puño sobre la frente del viejo vinculero, que cae con el rostro contra la tierra. (519)

Mauro’s smashing fist instantly kills Montenegro, causing his body to collapse to the floor. In a final retributive act, the colossal leader of the group of beggars, “el pobre de San Lázaro,” devastated by the death of his newfound father, rises from the fray and clutches Mauro’s neck:

*Y de pronto se ve crecer la sombra del leproso, poner sus manos sobre la garganta del segundón, luchar abrazados, y los albos dientes de lobo y la boca llagada, morderse y escupirse. Abrazados caen entre las llamas del hogar. Transfigurado, envuelto en ellas, hermoso como un haz de fuego, se levanta el pobre de San Lázaro.*

EL POBRE DE SAN LÁZARO. ¡Era nuestro padre!

LA VOZ DE TODOS. ¡Era nuestro padre! ¡Era nuestro padre! (519-20)

This symbolic act, the rising up of the masses through the sacrifice of an enlightened noble—Valle goes so far as to connect Montenegro’s final visage with Christ’s (“en el rostro la altivez de un rey la palidez de un Cristo”)—resonates with Valle’s injunction to the “indio mexicano” in his poem 1922 “¡Nos vemos!”:

¡Indio mexicano!

¡Rebélate y quema las trojes del trigo!

¡Rebélate hermano! [. . .]

Lo primero

Es colgar al Encomendero,

Y después segar el trigo. (OC II 1835)

In encouraging the “indio mexicano” to rebel against the *gachupines*, the merciless Mexican landowners, Valle instigates the masses to revolt against their insufferable social order. In *Romance de lobos*, written in 1908, some fourteen years prior to this poem, Valle provides an example that emerges from the flames to kill Montenegro’s murderer.

In each of these instances, fire is associated with death and rebirth. The pilgrim, attracted to the bonfire of the dying ewe, is killed. Montenegro, after receiving his son’s pitiless death blow, collapses into the scattered embers of his fireplace. Even his attacker, don Mauro, eventually suffers death by fire. The descent into flames and consequent demise become meaningful due to what rises from the inferno: the death of the pilgrim sends Ádega, the innocent shepherd girl, on a journey to prepare for the arrival of her son, the promised child of

the pilgrim; from the fire where Montenegro falls, a powerful, socially responsible leader emerges, violently revolting against the misbehaving aristocracy.<sup>1</sup>

This cyclical process through fire, death to rebirth, imitates the myth of the phoenix, a creature that, once its lifespan draws to a close, self-immolates and emerges from its ashes as a new, vibrant being. Through this myth, I argue, Valle also alludes to the founder of Spanish *tragicomedia*, Lope de Vega, who is widely known as “el Fénix de los ingenios españoles.” In creating the *tragicomedia*, Lope responds to a growing public disinterest in classical tragedy. He produces his new theatrical form in order to appeal to public sensibility and, in so doing, demonstrates the need for dramatic innovation.

In the nineteenth century, José de Echegaray reinterprets Lope’s tragicomic formula and develops his own overwhelmingly popular melodramatic model. His rampant success leads him to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, high praise for a theatrical form that multiple Spanish writers (Azorín, Valle-Inclán, etc.) reject as “arbitrariedad, ampulosa y vana retórica” (Valle *Entrevistas* 197). In essence, Echegaray stirs the *Fénix*’s ashes, reinstituting a popular dramatic model that does little to promote societal development by confirming the status quo. In the words of Wadda C. Ríos-Font, Echegaray’s “theater was seen as a revival of the glories of Golden Age drama,” although the playwright constantly relied on a “device of interpretation”—a technique that mimicked *Siglo de Oro* dramatic content and intrigue—in order to achieve great public acclaim (10, 11). Ríos-Font summarizes, “Echegaray’s plays always upheld traditional values” (11). In the decadent world of nineteenth century Spain, a world where society has grown apathetic to transformation and improvement, traditional values can only promote cultural stagnancy. Instead of upholding these values, Valle seeks to destroy them.

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<sup>1</sup> As Wadda Ríos-Font, in commenting on this scene from *Romance de lobos*, acknowledges, “[t]his death by fire is the sign of damnation for sinners and of purification for the virtuous” (179).

Valle's *esperpentos* derive from two distinct theories that the author discusses on several occasions. Initially conceived as a "visión astral," Valle first strives to distance himself as much as possible from his dramatic creations, presupposing a profound disconnect between their actions and his own morality. Second, the playwright reimagines his characters as the twisted reflections of a concave mirror. Drawing from mythic tradition, Valle removes tragic heroes from their traditional settings and drops them into a pitiless rendition of his contemporary Spain. By exaggerating the characters' weaknesses, Valle proposes that they, like his fellow countrymen—like he himself—cannot escape nor redeem Spanish society.

The chapter will draw from Valle's *Los cuernos de don Friolera* to demonstrate how, by demiurgically distancing himself from his characters and exacerbating their flaws, Valle creates a new, viable dramatic form for social renovation. While some critics, especially Antonio Buero Vallejo and Angel G. Loureiro, refuse to accept Valle's *esperpentos* as integrally esperpentic, in *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, according to John Lyon, "the whole dramatic conception [of the *esperpento*] is stylized" (*Theatre* 125). Fusing his "visión astral" with the distorted reflection of a concave mirror, Valle portrays puppets and puppet-like figures whose choices are determined by an obviously obsolete yet trenchantly stubborn moral code. Basing his story on Shakespeare's *Othello*, Valle explains that "[e]n *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, el dolor de éste es el mismo de *Otelo* y, sin embargo, no tiene su grandeza" (*Entrevistas* 297). By throwing a figure as "bella y noble" as Othello into a world absent of heroes, a place where hidebound values dominate societal decision-making, Valle sets him up for failure.

The society Valle depicts in his *esperpentos* is his own, a time far removed from the glorious feudal past that the playwright holds dear. His destructive vision, so evident in his *esperpentos*, demonstrates the absurd incompatibility of the tragic heroes of the past, those

figures that humanity views “de rodillas”—i.e., as exemplary models for success and achievement—with the suffocating decadence of the present (*Entrevistas* 394). As “enanos y patizambos,” these fallen heroes do what they can to survive, only to eventually suffer (and, as is the case for Max Estrella, die) under the overwhelming weight of a callous culture.

## II. *El Fénix* and Mass Appeal

In the prologue to his 1615 *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses*, Cervantes identifies his fellow playwright as “el monstruo de la naturaleza, el gran Lope de Vega” (“Prólogo”). Indeed, Lope’s theatrical output, estimated around 1,500 full-length plays and *entremeses*, defies human nature—how could a mere mortal playwright be so prolific?<sup>2</sup> On Lope’s sheer number of literary and dramatic works, even Goethe confides to Johann Peter Eckermann, “[w]hen I reflect what Lope de Vega accomplished, the number of my poetical productions seems very small” (104). Unlike Cervantes’s “monstruo de la naturaleza,” the origin of Lope’s other title, “El Fénix de los ingenios españoles” does not have a definitive literary referent. Critics are unable to discern how or why, besides public favor and widespread popularity, Lope is designated as *El Fénix*.<sup>3</sup> Tomás S. Tomóv explains that Lope “[f]ue denominado ‘El Fénix de los ingenios españoles’ por la excelencia de su espíritu,” while Miguel Ángel Auladell Pérez only relates that Lope “sería conocido como ‘Fénix de los ingenios españoles’” before launching into a short biographical

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<sup>2</sup> Of his dramatic works alone, Miguel Ángel Auladell Pérez writes, “Lope declaró haber escrito 1,500 piezas dramáticas; se conservan 426 comedias a él atribuidas (de las que sólo 314 son seguras) y 42 autos sacramentales” (“Autor”).

<sup>3</sup> Even Enrique García Santo-Tomás’s study, *La creación del “Fénix,”* sheds no light on the origins of this epithet. Rather, it “propone reconstruir el legado literario y crítico de cuatro obras fundacionales del teatro de Lope de Vega en el ámbito de la crítica española y europea a través de ciertos paradigmas de su recepción, con el fin de comprender las diferentes coordenadas estéticas y su influencia en la misma producción de la obra” (17). Instead of exploring the elusive origins of Lope’s nickname, Santo-Tomás uncovers his progressive aesthetic development over the course of four key works—*Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, *El perro del hortelano*, *El mejor alcalde, el rey*, and *Fuenteovejuna*. Santos-Tomás acknowledges Lope’s growth as an artist, thereby justifying his title, but does not explicitly recognize how he came to be known as “el Fénix.”

summary of Lope's life ("Cervantes" 617; "Autor"). While the origin of his title is strangely elusive, what interests me in this section is the metaphorical implications of Lope's widely recognized epithet, *El Fénix*.

The myth of the phoenix has a rich history with indefinite origins, although it shares critical similarities with an Egyptian holy bird, *benu*. As Hill explains, "[t]he phoenix may be a literary descendent of the *benu* or *bnw* of Egyptian solar myths, a sacred bird which, through association with the self-renewing deities Rē and Osiris, became a symbol of renewal or rebirth" (61). The phoenix eventually becomes integrated into Greek mythology and classical thinkers such as Herodotus, Ovid, and Pliny all incorporate it as a symbol of renewal and regeneration (Hill 61).<sup>4</sup> Early Christian thinkers later latch onto the phoenix's metaphorical potential and reinterpret it as a symbol for Christ and his resurrection. Hill summarizes, "early Christian writers construed the phoenix as a symbol not only of resurrection in general but also of Christ himself and his resurrection in particular. Thus, [. . .] the reborn phoenix arises from its predecessor's ashes only after three days have elapsed" (63). In an act of self-immolation, the phoenix lights on fire right before its death, burning away its previous body. From these ashes, Hill indicates, rises the new fledgling: "the phoenix next is ignited by the sun's rays, and the bird, fanning the flames with its wings, is quickly consumed, the new phoenix arising miraculously from its ashes" (63). Death, fire, rebirth; this cycle repeats endlessly for the phoenix. *El Fénix*, through theater, undergoes a similar process. At the outset of the seventeenth century, public interest in tragic theater has notability diminished and, in order to respond to the will of the people, Lope invents the *tragicomedia*.

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<sup>4</sup> Hill is careful to point out that Herodotus withholds the Phoenix's regenerative capacity in his *Persian Wars*: "classical authorities, attracted by the bird's reputed ability to regenerate itself (a subject omitted by Herodotus), substantially embellished the story, adding many details and making the theme of rebirth the central aspect of the myth" (61).

It is important to note that Lope's epithet, *El Fénix*, is followed by, “de los ingenios españoles.” Lope, in his poetic and dramatic works, possesses a regenerative quality that surpasses the abilities of other artists of his time. A type of ingenuity, to take the title at its literal value, percolates throughout his works, bestowing them with a peculiar vitality and overall relevance to the Spanish public. His dramatic writings are unique, in large part, because they resist a decaying model of theatrical performance that no longer resonates with its audience. As Lope explains in his 1609 *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*—a complete set of instructions for imitating his famous theatrical technique, the *tragicomedia*—, the public no longer admires classical tragedy:

[ . . . ] se ha quedado la costumbre  
 de llamar entremeses las comedias  
 antiguas donde está en su fuerza el arte  
 siendo una acción, y entre plebeya gente,  
 porque entremés de rey jamás se ha visto,  
 y aquí se ve que el arte, por bajeza  
 de estilo, vino a estar en tal desprecio,  
 y el rey en la comedia para el necio. (135)

The “arte” in question refers to the classical, Aristotelian model of tragedy, a style which the Spanish people (the “plebeya gente”) struggle to appreciate.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of the publication of *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, Spanish authors and playwrights find themselves caught between two conflicting models of dramatic writing, based on the author's integration or abandonment of classical precepts, especially those found in

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<sup>5</sup> Valle himself, in 1910, is of a similar opinion. In his play, *Voces de gesta*, Valle aims to “recog[er] la voz de todo un pueblo. Sólo son grandes los libros que recogen voces amplias plebeyas” (*Entrevistas* 61)

Aristotle's *On Poetics* (c. 335 BCE). Cervantes himself urges close assimilation of classical theatrical techniques, despite public preference. Towards the end of the first book of the *Quijote*, the curate and the canon debate the finer qualities of Spanish theater and reach a general consensus that “más gente atraerán [los actores] y más fama cobrarán representando comedias que sigan el arte que no con las disparatadas” (494). Cervantes refers to this dramatic style as “la comedia artificiosa y bien ordenada,” signaling that,

saldría el oyente alegre con las burlas, enseñando con las veras, admirado de los sucesos, discreto con las razones, advertido con los embusteros, sagaz con los ejemplos, airado contra el vicio y enamorado de la virtud: que todos estos afectos ha de despertar la buena comedia en el ánimo del que la escuchare, por rústico y torpe que sea, y de toda imposibilidad es imposible dejar de alegrar y entretener, satisfacer y contentar la comedia que todas estas partes tuviere mucho más que careciere de ellas, como por la mayor parte carecen estas que de ordinario ahora se representan. (496-97)

The only problem, as the two clergymen reluctantly admit, is that “todas o las más [comedias] son conocidos disparates y cosas que no llevan pies ni cabeza, y, con todo eso, el vulgo las oye con gusto, y las tiene y las aprueba por buenas, estando tan lejos de serlo” (493). Classical norms and traditional tragedy have given way to a rising form of popular entertainment, a technique that Lope de Vega specializes in: *la tragicomedia*.

Unlike Cervantes's intense focus on the classical model, Lope's tragicomic style endears itself to the public because it, as Cervantes painstakingly points out, possesses base entertainment value. Making some of his more unsavory criticisms in thinly-veiled references to Lope, Cervantes explains that “no está la falta en el vulgo, que pide disparates, sino en aquellos

que no saben representar otra cosa. [. . .] las [comedias] que ahora se representan son espejos de disparates, ejemplos de necesidades e imágenes de lascivia” (*Quijote* 494-95). Referencing Cicero’s representational formula that compares dramatic performance to an “espejo de la vida humana, ejemplo de las costumbres e imagen de la verdad,” Cervantes implies that Lope, in appealing to the masses, derails any didactic opportunities that theater should inherently provide its audience (495). Unlike Lope, Cervantes feels that public approval should not determine the type of plays a dramaturge creates. Rather, by imitating classical performance theory, he insists that theater can teach upstanding virtues, traditional wisdom, and honorable lifestyles.

Lope, on the other hand, has already tried to incorporate the classic model—what he designates “el arte”—but to little popular avail. “[L]o que a mí me daña en esta parte,” he acknowledges, “es haber escrito [las comedias] sin el arte” (*Arte nuevo* 132). Lope owns up to his accusers, explaining why he chooses to abandon the classical style:

[. . .] en fin, hallé que las comedias  
 estaban en España en aquel tiempo,  
 no como sus primeros inventores  
 pensaron que el mundo se escribieran,  
 mas como las trataron muchos bárbaros  
 que enseñaron el vulgo a sus rudezas;  
 y así se introdujeron de tal modo  
 que quien con arte ahora las escribe  
 muere sin fama y galardón. (132)

Since popular opinion no longer appreciates or admires classical drama, a fact which, according to Lope, directly affects his livelihood, he writes *tragicomedias* in order to survive financially.

Further, Lope argues that he has learned a new style, impressed upon him by the public:

[. . .] escribo por el arte que inventaron  
 los que el vulgar aplauso pretendieron  
 porque, como las paga el vulgo, es justo  
 hablarle en necio para darle gusto. (133)

The division between Cervantes and Lope has to do with the former's dedication to an obsolescent Aristotelian model of tragedy and the latter's desire to move forward with a style that appeals to the masses. By merging the comic and tragic forms, Lope has discovered a way to rekindle public dramatic interest. Figuratively speaking, the venerable phoenix of classical tragedy has finally roosted and burned away. From its dying flames rises a new dramatic form that fuses tragedy with comedy; from its ashes emerges the *tragicomedia* heralded by Lope de Vega, "el Fénix de los ingenios españoles."

### III. The Death of Tragedy and the Rise of Echegarayan Melodrama

George Steiner, in his 1964 text, *The Death of Tragedy*, associates the demise of the tragic form with the decline of the aristocracy. Juxtaposing societal structure with tragedy, Steiner creates an allegory:

In Athens, in Shakespeare's England, and at Versailles, the hierarchies of worldly power were stable and manifest. The wheel of social life spun around the royal or aristocratic centre. From it, spokes of order and degree led to the outward rim of

the common man. Tragedy presumes such a configuration. Its sphere is that of royal courts, dynastic quarrels, and vaulting ambitions. (194)

As the feudalistic hierarchal structure grows increasingly destabilized by the emerging middle class, tragedy shifts from the public to the private sphere, ultimately transforming into the novel.<sup>6</sup> Tragedy's gradual public disappearance, instigated by societal transformation, necessarily creates a disinterested audience largely unaware of tragic conventions and themes. Steiner explains:

After the seventeenth century the audience ceased to be an organic community to which these ideas and their attendant habits of figurative language would be natural or immediately familiar. Concepts such as grace, damnation, purgation, blasphemy, or the chain of being, which are everywhere implicit in classic and Shakespearean tragedy, lose their vitality. They become philosophic abstractions of a private and problematic relevance, or mere catchwords in religious customs which had in them a diminishing part of active belief. (197)

Miguel de Cervantes and Lope de Vega find themselves caught up in the midst of these seventeenth century societal transmutations. On the one hand, Cervantes's strict adherence to tragic conventions diminishes the popularity of his dramatic works. Lope, on the other hand, enjoys immense success by engaging the public's growing interest in tragicomic theater.

The immense popular appeal of Lope's *tragicomedias*, reinforced by Cervantes's bitter complaints (which indubitably stemmed from his own financial sorrows, a problem his strict adherence to unpopular tragic norms did little to remedy), required the playwright to partially

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<sup>6</sup> "With the rise to power of the middle class," writes Steiner, "the centre of gravity in human affairs shifted from the public to the private. [. . .] And private tragedy became the chosen ground not of drama, but of the new, unfolding art of the novel" (195).

abandon conventional tragedy by blending it with comedic forms. This dramatic amalgamation constitutes the basis for José Echegaray's melodrama in the nineteenth century. "El melodrama de la España de la Restauración," Gonzalo Sobejano speculates, "estimábase representado, si yo no me equivoco, por Echegaray" ("Echegaray" 93). Wadda C. Ríos-Font elaborates:

Echegaray's mechanism of impersonation gave to melodrama enough respectability to figure as consequential dramatic production, and to the author the reputation of a new *monstruo de la naturaleza*—the nineteenth century's answer to Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. His particular dramatic recipe appealed enormously to Spanish audiences. (11)

Mass appeal, the very idea Cervantes repudiated in his dramatic technique due to its adherence to "espejos de disparates, ejemplos de necedades e imágenes de lascivia," is the primary force that drives the popularity of Lope's *tragicomedias* in the seventeenth century and, by comparable extension, Echegaray's melodramas during the nineteenth (*Quijote* 495).

In 1904, Echegaray becomes the first Spaniard to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Several members of Spain's rising *Generación del '98* find this selection utterly astonishing. Valle-Inclán and Azorín were among Echegaray's most fervent detractors and, in 1905, in lieu of writing a *homenaje* for the Nobel Prize winner, craft a deprecatory piece against Echegaray titled "Protesta" in the short-lived journal, *España*. Manuel Alberca and Cristóbal González relate that:

Valle [. . .] encabezó, junto a Azorín, un movimiento contra la oratoria vacía y los tópicos melodramáticos que a su juicio y el de otros jóvenes escritores representaba Echegaray. Los dos escritores redactaron un manifiesto en el que se marcaban las distancias con respecto al público de Echegaray, al que se

consideraba representante de una España caduca, llena de prejuicios y corroída por la mentira y los intereses caciquiles. (93)

By 1905, Valle had barely published the first edition of his *Sonata de invierno*, the final collection of the marqués de Bradomín's memories which depict, in no uncertain terms, a figure whose earlier successes are overshadowed by his present failures. Unable to seduce anyone of consequence, he makes a paltry attempt to woo his (allegedly) own daughter, Maximina. This late manifestation of a *hidalgo* who has patently surpassed his prime draws attention to one of Valle's primary concerns with the aging aristocracy. The values it supposedly upholds—virtue, honor, dignity, etc.—have fallen by the wayside in his present-day Spain.

Between 1908 and 1909, Valle publishes his novelistic trilogy, *La guerra carlista*, which supplies multiple examples of *hidalgos* behaving honorably—a older yet selfless marqués, a bellicose and fervent Juan Manuel de Montenegro—in order to lend their support to the *carlistas*, the final belligerent remnants of the late Spanish feudal order. In these works, Valle paints a picture of proper aristocratic behavior. When held against the portrait of modern nobility, synecdochally portrayed by Montenegro's wayward sons in Valle's 1908 *Romance de lobos*, irreconcilable discrepancies arise. While Bradomín sells off his entire estate to benefit the *carlistas*, Montenegro's sons repeatedly petition their father for their inheritance. Whereas Montenegro dutifully sends his most honorable son, Cara de Plata, to fight for the Carlist pretender, his other sons—the *bárbaros* the title of the dramatic series, *Las comedias bárbaras*, alludes to—infiltrate their father's estate in the dead of night in order to rob anything of value. From unquenchable avarice to premeditated thievery, Montenegro's sons, representatives of the rising aristocracy, possess no redeeming qualities.<sup>7</sup> Valle-Inclán's early conviction, so integral to

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<sup>7</sup> It should be clear that, in comprehensively condemning Montenegro's sons, I do not refer to Cara de Plata, Montenegro's first-born. Since he follows his father's orders to enlist in the Carlist cause, he is the only exception to

his devotion to the Carlist movement—an unmistakably hopeless cause at the turn of the century—, that the *nobleza* of the present only nominally reflects the *nobleza* of the past, manifests itself theatrically by his repudiation of Echegarayan melodrama.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Steiner couples the vitality of tragedy with the rise and fall of feudal aristocracy and the development of the novel, Valle accuses public insensitivity to the dramatic arts—one of Cervantes’s principal complaints in his efforts to apply the tragic model in contemporary theater—of allowing Spanish theater to sink into melodrama.<sup>9</sup> In a 1915 interview in *La Esfera* with *El Caballero Audaz*, Valle expounds:

El autor dramático con capacidad y honradez literaria hoy lucha con dificultades insuperables, y la mayor de todas es el mal gusto del público. Fíjese usted que digo el mal gusto y no la incultura. Un público inculto tiene la posibilidad de educarse, y esa es la misión del artista. Pero un público corrompido con el melodrama y comedia ñoña es cosa perdida. (*Entrevistas* 146)

When facing a similar situation in the seventeenth century, Lope de Vega adapted the tragic model by combining comedic elements to generate his immensely popular *tragicomedia*. Valle, however, refuses to surrender artistic control to the will of the masses.<sup>10</sup> His formula, specifically

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the barbarous behavior exhibited by his brothers and, since the wars occur simultaneously with the events in *Romance de lobos*, he never actually appears in the final play in the dramatic trilogy. About Montenegro, Manuel García-Pelayo observes that “sus hijos, salvo Cara de Plata, son unos degenerados” (268).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Valle’s fixation with the *carlistas*, please consult my first chapter, especially section III, “Carlism” (pp. 33-36).

<sup>9</sup> Ironically, given Steiner’s observation that tragedy, after retreating from the public into the private domain, transforms into the novel, Valle mentions that “[s]i Lope de Vega viviese hoy, lo más probable es que no fuese autor dramático, sino novelista” (*Entrevistas* 146).

<sup>10</sup> This confrontation between Lope and Valle is unintentional. Valle, in fact, fervently admires Lope’s artistic ability, confiding to Vicente Sánchez Ocaña in 1926 that “Lope, que hace obras como *La estrella de Sevilla* y *El caballero de Olmedo* [es. . . uno de los] artistas románticos considerables en nuestra tierra” (*Entrevistas* 299). Further, during a homage to María Palou and Jacinto Benavente, he acknowledges Lope as a “completo autor dramático [que] se crea todo un escenario” (*Entrevistas* 443).

What I wish to emphasize in this section is the way that the two playwrights’ dramatic styles diverge: Lope draws from public demand to create his *tragicomedias*; Valle instead carefully develops his theatrical technique before

created for his version of an idealized audience, requires “normas que imponerle al público, e imponerlas, si no hay público, crearlo. [. . .] El artista debe imponerse al público cuando está seguro de su honradez artística, y si no lo hace así es porque carece de personalidad y energía” (*Entrevistas* 147). Valle, like Cervantes, will not allow public preference to determine his theatrical production.<sup>11</sup> He urgently resists the will of the masses—“un público corrompido con el melodrama”—and actively seeks ways to dramatically counter the growing decadence of the rising aristocracy. Valle, in his initial efforts to criticize and reshape society through theater, does not work alone, other contemporary playwrights, such as Jacinto Benavente, have similar aims, but from different ideological and cultural perspectives.

#### IV. Beyond Benavente

In 1907, the curtains rise on Jacinto Benavente’s *Los intereses creados*, a *comedia de polichinelas* that, while not dealing expressly with marionettes, does draw from old Spanish tradition to, like Valle, criticize Spanish society at the turn of the century, but with a much milder purpose and orientation, void of the radical social and cultural criticism present in the *esperpentos*. The play begins with a penniless protagonist, Leandro, whose mischievous servant, Crispín, methodically schemes, planting lie upon lie, to argue in favor his master’s ‘riches.’ As a play from the “principios del siglo XVII,” it still enforces a strong honor code, meaning that

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addressing his audience. In other words, Lope’s plays are produced by public appeal, Valle’s only appear after he constructs the theoretical framework for his dramatic technique, regardless of its popular reception.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, Valle indicates in a 1929 interview with Luis Emilio Soto that “el teatro antes que nada exige un público, incluso antes que el propio autor. Y la condición específica de este público es estar ligado por un sentimiento común” (*Entrevistas* 408). Some fourteen years after his interview with *El caballero audaz*, Valle seems to place the public after technique, reversing his earlier strategy. Of course, this insight appears only during one of Valle’s more lengthy monologues on the inherent nature of drama. Attempting to explain that each nation contains its own unique dramatic form, culled from the cultural fabric of its society, he undoubtedly also wished to connect the public (the very people who create and have direct access to the cultural substratum of their nation) with the theater.

Crispín's lies are unquestioningly believed (68). Just one example of many: the innkeeper with strict, "ordenanzas muy severas," takes Crispín for his word that he hasn't, "librado de mala" (76). The irony is that when asked to place his confidence in a captain from the army, someone who should be trusted, the innkeeper stubbornly refuses:

CAPITÁN. ¿Y no somos personas de crédito a quien puede fiarse?

HOSTELERO. Para mí, no. (78)

Indeed, Benavente recognizes an inconsistency in the innkeeper's trust; if he cannot trust the word of his superiors (e.g., a captain), then who can he rely on? Unfortunately, the innkeeper botches his allegiances and confides in the empty promises of Crispín.

At the very beginning of *Los intereses creados*, Benavente has Crispín address the audience in a prologue which connects the play with a modern audience in the following words:

Bien conoce el autor que tan primitivo espectáculo no es el más digno de un culto auditorio de estos tiempos; así, de vuestra cultura tanto como de vuestra bondad se ampara. El autor sólo pide que añeéis cuanto sea posible vuestro espíritu. El mundo está ya viejo y chochea; el Arte no se resigna a envejecer, y por parecer niño finge balbuceos. (70)

Implying that his modern audience is by far more cultured than the simpleton characters in his play, Benavente waxes heavily satirical. By the very fact that he encourages the audience member to "añe[ar] cuanto sea posible [su] espíritu," he also takes a jab at contemporary aesthetic sensitivity. While both Benavente and Valle-Inclán criticize societal shortcomings, Benavente does so with much more finesse, evading the unrelenting condemnatory tone set by the *esperpentos*.

Regarding Benavente, Ramón Gómez de la Serna characterizes him as, “un flordelisado pirrimplimpín que pasaba raudo por los escenarios, que era ágil en sus saltos,” and admires his theatrical ability, “frente al teatro malo y completamente deleznable y chabacano de antes de él, componía un teatro inteligente y desenvuelto” (664). Undeniably brilliant, Benavente’s gentle correctives may seem an extension of his personality; a personality that finds itself already entrenched among other members of the aristocracy. As Gómez de la Serna observes, “esa misma aristocracia a la que él zahiere, como ella misma se zahiere a sí misma” (662).

Contrasting the playwright with Benito Pérez Galdós, Lewis E. Brett comments, “Benavente, the personification of elegance, malice and discretion, takes life less seriously; his satire, more ironical than pessimistic, is often destructive, yet it could be turned to noble purposes” (862). In this sense, Benavente’s form of criticism differs greatly with Valle-Inclán’s.

What Benavente does with irony, i.e., carefully critique societal shortcomings, Valle does with a sledge hammer. Whereas Benavente’s theatrical techniques disagree with certain cultural practices of the day and offer possible solutions, Valle’s *esperpentos* stretch their allegories to the point of absurdity, smashing hope for society in the process. Benavente advises minimal and idealistic societal adjustments; Valle requires a societal reboot. His style is one of destruction without remedy, laying waste to the brittle superficiality of Spanish aristocracy. His *esperpentos* are excellent examples of his utter disgust with Spanish culture at the turn of the century: its outdated honor code, its religious insincerity, and its false morality. Unable to turn a blind eye, Valle’s imperative, unlike Benavente’s, who, “se mostró cada vez más cómodo en su papel de dueño absoluto del gusto burgués,” is to aesthetically raze Spanish culture, society, and history (Díaz 13).

As a man of his times, Valle critically responds to the theatrical styles that precede him, primarily romanticism (Hartzenbusch, Zorrilla, Rivas), Echegaray's melodrama, and Benavente's conservative theater. Instead of praising the traditional Castilian sense of honor, Valle-Inclán parodies it (cf. *Los cuernos de don Friolera*); rather than devoutly professing the Catholic faith, he disparages it (cf. *Divinas palabras*); in lieu of approving societal customs, he reveals them for what they are: hypocritical pretense (cf. *Luces de Bohemia*). Valle, instead of building up bankrupt aristocratic values, urges their destruction. In an article co-authored with Azorín and titled, "La protesta," Valle condemns the aristocracy in its present state, urging revolution. Robert Lima translates Valle's speech: "[t]here must also be a protest against the many others who, like [Echegaray. . .] stand for a Spain that is long past, dead, corroded by prejudice and deceit, assaulted by despots, exploited by an extortive bureaucracy" (*Valle-Inclán* 248, 32n).<sup>12</sup> Valle stages this protest in his theater, injecting his fierce societal critiques into the pages of his *esperpentos*.

## V. From Above, Looking Down

During the middle of the first World War, Valle-Inclán receives a special invitation from Jacques Chaumié to visit the battlefield between France and Germany, submerge himself in the sights and sounds of war, and write about his singular experience.<sup>13</sup> During his visit, he encounters a group of pilots with whom he spends two days. "¿Tomó parte en el combate?" rhetorically asks Corpus Barga, insisting that Valle "no pudo negar que había volado sobre el

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<sup>12</sup> Regrettably, I am not able to locate the original source for this quote. The only version I have is Lima's translation. Although Lima frequently complements his translations with the original citation in Spanish, this appears in a footnote without a corroboratory source.

<sup>13</sup> Chaumié was a French diplomat who traveled throughout Spain during the early twentieth century and translated numerous volumes from a wide array of Spanish authors, including Valle's own "Mi hermana Antonia" and *Romance de lobos*. More information can be found at the beginning of Corpus Barga's 1966 article, "Valle-Inclán en la más alta ocasión," especially pp. 288-92.

campo de batalla. El primer adelanto que trajo la guerra del ‘14 fue volar de noche, nadie se había atrevido hasta entonces a hacerlo” (296). These flights had a profound impact on Valle and his experiences transformed into a two-part novelistic series, *La media noche* and *En la luz del día*, published in 1916 and 1917, respectively.<sup>14</sup> His central objective during the visit, as Valle discloses in the “Breve noticia” for *La media noche*, was “ser centro y tener de la guerra una visión astral, fuera de geometría y de cronología, como si el alma, desencarnada ya, mirase a la tierra desde su estrella” (OC I 904). In mystical terms, Valle sought to capture a single moment—“un día de guerra”—from an omniscient vantage point, one where he could observe the “cientos de miles [de] los relatos,” including “[c]uando los soldados de Francia vuelvan a sus pueblos, y los ciegos vayan por las veredas con sus lazarillos, y los que no tienen piernas pidan limosna a la puerta de las iglesias, y los mancos corran de una parte a otra con alegre oficio de terceros; cuando en el fondo de los hogares se nombre a los muertos y se rece por ellos” (903-904). Each of these events, argues Valle, can be circumscribed into an infinite perspective unconstrained by the boundaries of time by bending all occurrences into a circle, adding a cyclical dimension to everyday events.<sup>15</sup>

Although temporally liberating, Valle’s vision is spatially restrictive; he must, as he acknowledges, obtain a “visión astral” (OC I 904). This towering heavenly view, high above the humdrum of daily existence, requires a definitive distance from the subjects under consideration. While the observer can minutely focus on the details of each individual—the wandering blind

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<sup>14</sup> As Manuel Alberca notes, this flight, while not absolutely confirmed by scholars, “constituyó el fundamento del hallazgo narrativo que experimentó [Valle-Inclán]” (*Valle-Inclán* 169).

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Valle’s book of spiritual exercises, *La lámpara maravillosa*, so powerfully inflected by Gnosticism and esoteric values, appears in 1917, the same year as *La media noche*’s companion piece, *En la luz del día*. At the time, Valle finds himself deeply enmeshed in Gnostic thought, traces of which can be found thirteen years earlier in his *Flor de santidad* (1904). The eternal circle and cyclical decay and rebirth are common Gnostic themes. For more information, please consult my first chapter, “A Setting Son: Religious Decay and Secularization in Spain,” especially section VI.2., “Gnosticism” (pp. 58-64).

men, the legless beggars, the disabled messengers, the praying families—, he cannot reach out and directly influence their lives; an insuperable cosmic gap separates the spectator from those he watches. Like a pilot steering an aircraft, the “visión astral” only allows him to gaze below, feeling neither pity nor remorse for lives he has no control over.<sup>16</sup> Valle’s earlier flight over the French trenches of World War I contributed considerably to the generation of his three-part dramatic theory, which serves as a foundational principle for his *esperpentos*.<sup>17</sup>

In a 1928 interview with G. Martínez Sierra, Valle discloses that there exist three unique ways of perceiving the world, all of which are most clearly exemplified in literary and theatrical works. He explains: “hay tres modos de ver el mundo, artística o estéticamente: de rodillas, en pie o levantado en el aire” (*Entrevistas* 394). Each step requires the author to progressively distance itself spatially and emotionally from its characters. The first method, “de rodillas,” allows the characters themselves to occupy a superior space to the author; he can only admire, idolize, and emulate their actions. Valle elaborates:

Cuando se mira de rodillas—y ésta es la posición más antigua en literatura—, se da a los personajes, a los héroes una condición superior a la condición humana, cuando menos a la condición del narrador o del poeta. Así, Homero atribuye a sus héroes condiciones que en modo alguno tienen los hombres. Se crean, por decirlo así, seres superiores a la naturaleza humana: dioses, semidioses y héroes. (394)

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<sup>16</sup> In a 1926 interview with Vicente Sánchez Ocaña, Valle explains that “la mayor parte de los artistas españoles consideran a sus personajes criaturas inferiores. El creador no fraterniza con los seres que crea: permanece ajeno a ellos, sobre ellos. La crueldad, tan característica de la literatura nuestra, procede de eso: de que el autor está por encima de sus personajes; le son indiferentes los dolores de los personajes esos” (*Entrevistas* 300).

<sup>17</sup> Rodolfo Cardona and Anthony N. Zahareas detect a continuity between Valle’s *La media noche* and his theory of the *esperpentos* based on the dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries. They explain, “[e]n *La media noche* Valle-Inclán trata, formalmente, de superar las limitaciones temporales y espaciales de una narración creando una visión total de ‘un momento de guerra,’ es decir, que combina mito sugestivo con historia concreta” (29),

In this first style, the author becomes subject to his creations, imbuing them with qualities worthy of adoration and emulation. Rather than create figures that reciprocate his own trials and tribulations, the author grants them quasi-perfect attributes, generating beings that exceed human nature.

The second model, “en pie,” places the characters at the same level as the author. No longer subjected to the imposing heroic qualities of the figures, an author can parallel the accomplishments and failures found in the work with his own personal successes and shortcomings. In Valle’s words:

Hay una segunda manera, que es mirar a los protagonistas novelescos como de nuestra propia naturaleza, como si fuesen nuestros hermanos, como si fuesen nosotros mismos, como si fuera el personaje un desdoblamiento de nuestro yo, con nuestras mismas virtudes y nuestros mismos defectos. Esta es, indudablemente, la manera que más prospera. Esto es Shakespeare, todo Shakespeare. Los celos de Otelo son los celos que podría haber sufrido el autor, y las dudas de Hamlet, las dudas que podría haber sentido el autor. Los personajes, en este caso son los de la misma naturaleza humana, ni más ni menos que el que los crea: son una realidad, la máxima verdad. (394-95)

Valle’s second formula mimetically transposes the identity of the characters upon the author himself. This style forms a therapeutic link between two distinct, albeit compatible beings. The sycophantic infatuation associated with the first method dissolves into a sympathetic bond between author and character.

The third model supposes a profound distancing between author and character, creator and creature. Resembling the “visión astral” applied in Valle’s *La media noche*, the author aims

to sever any emotional connection he feels with the characters; so removed from them, he can sardonically criticize their misgivings without feeling a hint of remorse. Valle describes this technique as follows:

[H]ay una tercera manera, que es mirar al mundo desde un plano superior, y considerar a los personajes de la trama como seres inferiores al autor, con un punto de ironía. Los dioses se convierten en personajes de sainete. Esta es una manera muy española, manera de demiurgo, que no se cree en modo alguno hecho del mismo barro que sus muñecos. Quevedo tiene esta manera. Cervantes, también. A pesar de la grandeza de don Quijote, Cervantes se cree más cabal y más cuerdo que él, y jamás se emociona con él.

Esta manera es ya definitiva en Goya. Y esta consideración es la que me movió a dar un cambio en mi literatura y a escribir los “esperpentos,” el género literario que yo bautizo con el nombre de “esperpentos.” (*Entrevistas* 395)

From manipulative puppeteers to dispassionate demiurges, this perspective implies that the author always occupies a superior sphere to his characters. Their misgivings have no bearing on his own person. Between the first and the third methods, there exists two uniquely inverted vantage points.

Whereas the first technique encourages the author to emulate and idolize his characters due to their superhuman attributes (e.g., Achilles’s near-impenetrability, Odysseus’s unfailing intellect, etc.), Valle’s third model derides these characters by reversing their preferential positioning with respect to the author. In other words, he (the author and, in the case of the *esperpentos*, the playwright) elevates himself so far above his creations that their insufficiencies

have no bearing on his own person.<sup>18</sup> In order to achieve this dramatic distancing, Valle must separate himself morally, aesthetically, and spatially (i.e., he no longer occupies the same plane of existence) from his characters.<sup>19</sup> These displaced heroes must, in turn, figuratively pass through a distortive mirror which exaggerates their deficiencies and forces them into roles in which they, due to their disfigurements, cannot succeed; they are, in no uncertain terms, doomed to fail.<sup>20</sup>

## VI. Concave Mirrors

Valle's deforming aesthetic derives from actual mirrors found on the *callejón del Gato* that distort and distend the reflections of a captivated audience.<sup>21</sup> "Los espejos cóncavos," explain Cardona and Zahareas, "están en el callejón del Gato. Mucha gente pasa por allí e,

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<sup>18</sup> Valle himself suggests that the esperpentic technique extends to multiple literary genres. In the same 1928 interview with Martínez Sierra, he connects two of his own later novels with the *esperpentos*: "[y] con este sentido [esperpéntico] los he llevado a *Tirano Banderas* [1926] y a *El ruedo ibérico* [1927]. Vienen a ser estas dos novelas esperpentos acrecidos y trabajados con elementos que no podían darse la forma dramática de *Luces de Bohemia* y de *Los cuernos de don Friolera*" (395).

<sup>19</sup> While similar in scope to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), Valle's target and technique of alienation—the author set at a distance from the characters via temporal and spatial separation—differs from Brecht's, whose aim is to disrupt what Samuel Taylor Coleridge designates as the "willing suspension of disbelief" vis-à-vis drawing attention to the artificial nature of theater (*Biographia* 6). "A representation that alienates," explains Brecht, "is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (192). He adds that "the actor has to discard whatever means he has learn[ed] of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays" (193).

Regarding Valle's connection with Brecht (or vice-versa, given that Valle precedes him by at least a decade), Alfonso Sastre claims that Valle "empleó la técnica que Brecht habría de llamar 'técnica de la distanciaci3n'; rompi3 con las convenciones neoclásicas y naturalistas; escribi3 su teatro con un componente narrativo (empleando una forma teatral que con Brecht se llamaría 'épica') pero al mismo tiempo cargado de sustancia dramática (lo que no siempre ocurre en Brecht)" (75). Buero Vallejo also acknowledges that Valle's "desmitificaci3n, esa distancia crítica del autor—por lo tanto, del espectador—respecto a sus criaturas, anuncia lo que después ha preconizado Brecht" (OC II 923).

<sup>20</sup> Valle, pointing to the famous twelfth scene from *Luces de Bohemia*, summarizes the distortive effect the concave mirror has on its subject, the classical hero: "[e]l mundo de los esperpentos—explica uno de los personajes en *Luces de Bohemia*—es como si los héroes antiguos se hubiesen deformado en los espejos cóncavos de la calle, con un transporte grotesco, pero rigurosamente geométrico." (*Entrevistas* 395).

<sup>21</sup> While Max Estrella attempts to allegorize Spanish decadence with the disfiguring reflection of the concave mirror, his comic sidekick, don Latino, enjoys looking into them, finding his deformed image grotesquely amusing:

MAX. Las imágenes más bellas en un espejo cóncavo, son absurdas.

DON LATINO. Conforme. Pero a mí me divierte mirarme en los espejos de la calle del Gato. (OC II 933)

inevitablemente, se mira en los espejos y hasta se ríe contemplando su propia distorsión somática” (36). Cardonas and Zahareas further juxtapose the classical model of the mirror (that produces a reliable mimetic reflection of its subject) with the deforming aesthetic of its concave counterpart. The former technique allows the viewer to see what he/she wishes to see. Without the latter’s deforming component, no questions are raised about the allegorical implications of such a reflection. As Cardonas and Zahareas relate:

Consideremos el problema concreto de reflejar la imagen absurda de una España miserable. ¿Qué sucedería si captásemos dicha imagen absurda con un espejo normal? Como la norma clásica se preocupa por el sentido coherente de la realidad, entonces, el clásico espejo plano buscaría la imagen bella y no la deformada, no buscaría lo absurdo de la situación sino su esencia y perfecto sentido, no una España grotesca sino el sentido coherente, teleológico, de una España permanente, castiza, como si buscara la vertebración a una “España invertebrada.”<sup>22</sup> (36)

The classical mirror accordingly divulges a beguiling image based on the viewer’s habitual expectations. Such a reflection raises no qualms, ventures no questions, or urges any meaningful societal comparisons. According to Cardonas and Zahareas, “[s]i una deformación, con todo su absurdo, se representa como bella o como llena de sentido, entonces tal representación no sólo es inexacta sino que, transformada la realidad de algo grotesco en algo bello, sería irónicamente una deformación de la propia realidad” (37). The point in question revolves around the perception

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<sup>22</sup> Cardonas and Zahareas’s allusion to Ortega y Gasset’s 1921 text is patently obvious. Please see my third chapter, particularly section II, “Mass Mentality and Ignoble Nobility” for a discussion on parallels between Valle-Inclán and Ortega y Gasset.

and portrayal of reality: if a corrupted society is presented in an uncorrupted way, how can that challenge social stereotypes or address societal problems?

On the other hand, a concave mirror, according to Cardonas and Zahareas, challenges its viewer to reflect on the meaning behind its distorted appearance. They rhetorically ask:

¿Qué sucedería ahora si captásemos dichas imágenes absurdas *no* en un espejo clásico, como suelen hacer las tragedias tradicionales, sino en un espejo cóncavo que, como hemos visto, deforma las imágenes más bellas y hace que resultan absurdas? Max [Estrella] contesta con dos frases categóricas: la deformación (digamos España, como deformación grotesca) pierde su deformidad porque aquí la realidad absurda *se ve como tal*: se ve exactamente como ella es. (37)

The viewer, so caught up in society, cannot, according to Cardonas and Zahareas's logic, discern the eroding values that Valle finds so distressing. When subjected to a concave mirror, they argue, the viewer must confront its reflection in a metaphorical fashion, pondering the meaning behind the disfigured image. Based essentially on an absurd sense of life, where expectation sharply contrasts with actuality, Cardonas and Zahareas boldly state that a concave mirror ironically depicts reality "exactamente como ella es," unlike its classical model, which portrays a logical, coherent sense of reality as an unexpectedly inaccurate representation of society.<sup>23</sup> An honest depiction of societal decay, according to Valle, requires a degenerative, not a mimetic, medium.

Alfonso Sastre identifies this type of abstraction, that of a concave mirror, as "poética de la caricatura." He continues, "si alguien tiene una 'gran' nariz se le dibuja con una nariz

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<sup>23</sup> It is not my aim to contrast classical representation with modern experimentation. Following Cardonas and Zahareas's logic (which they base fundamentally on Valle's esperpentic theories), the only way to construct a meaningful critique of societal decadence is to portray that society in a deformed model. Accurate reflections will not, according to Cardonas and Zahareas, convey any significant societal messages to their audience.

‘enorme’” (72).<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, Sastre describes the *esperpentos* as a disturbing type of disfiguration paired with comedy: “risa, escalofrío y espanto” (71). As don Estrafalarío and don Manolito explain at the beginning of *Los cuernos de don Friolera*:

DON ESTRAFALARIO. [. . .] Reservamos nuestras burlas para aquello que nos es semejante.

DON MANOLITO. Hay que amar, don Estrafalarío: La risa y las lágrimas son los caminos de Dios. Ésa es mi estética y la de usted.

ESTRAFALARIO. La mía no. Mi estética es una superación del dolor y de la risa, como deben ser las conversaciones de los muertos, al contarse historias de los vivos. (OC II 993)

While Estrafalarío moves beyond Manolito’s original aesthetic scheme (i.e., he not only employs “la risa y las lágrimas” in his art, but strives to overcome them), both characters embrace the dual formula (distortive and comic) that Sastre detects in Valle’s *esperpentos*.<sup>25</sup> Curiously, Valle first identifies his innovative theatrical technique in 1921—the same year as the principal publication (in *entregas*) of *Los cuernos de don Friolera*—as “un género nuevo, al que llamo ‘género estrafalarío’” (*Entrevistas* 197). The character who shares a name with the genre he depicts becomes a *portavoz* for explaining the aesthetic blueprint of Valle’s *esperpentos*.

In a 1928 interview with Gregorio Martínez Sierra, Valle directly connects his *esperpentos* with tragedy, but insists that his characters defy the stereotypical characters found in the classical genre. According to Valle, the *esperpentos* portray “los héroes llamados a

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<sup>24</sup> Sastre indubitably had Quevedo’s poem, “A un hombre de gran nariz,” in mind when making this allusion. Valle frequently associated his *esperpentos* with Quevedo, claiming to imitate a style that famous artists such as Cervantes, Quevedo, and Goya already put into practice: “[e]sta es una manera muy española, manera de demiurgo, que no se cree en modo alguno del mismo barro que sus muñecos. Quevedo tiene esta manera” (*Entrevistas* 395).

<sup>25</sup> Bradomín’s praise for the “bagatela” presages the comic component Valle included in his *esperpentos*: “[y]o no aspiro a enseñar, sino a divertir. Toda mi doctrina está en una sola frase: ¡Viva la bagatela! Para mí haber aprendido a sonreír, es la mayor conquista de la Humanidad” (OC I 595).

“representar una fábula clásica no deformada. Son enanos y patizambos, que juegan una tragedia” (*Entrevistas* 395). Valle’s deforming aesthetic stretches, distends, and distorts the traditional tragic characters, empowering their weaknesses in such a way that they come to dominate their personas, transforming them into “enanos y patizambos.” He explains:

en las tragedias antiguas, los personajes marchaban al destino trágico, valiéndose del gesto trágico. Yo en mi nuevo género también conduzco a los personajes al destino trágico, pero me valgo para ello del gesto ridículo. En la vida existen muchos seres que llevan la tragedia dentro de sí y que son capaces de una actitud levantada, resultando, por el contrario, grotescos en todos sus actos” (*Entrevistas* 197).

A reflection in a concave mirror relies on ridiculous exaggeration in order to convey its image to an audience. Likewise, Valle’s *esperpentos* throw mythical heroes into absurd scenarios, testing their limits by proving their incompatibility with and utter failure to redeem Spain at the turn-of-the-century, a society that has, by the 1920s (the year *Luces de Bohemia*, Valle’s first formally recognized *esperpento* is produced), fallen into terrible decadence.

Before advancing to the following section, I must emphasize that Valle-Inclán’s esperpentic instructions—total detachment à la “manera de demiurgo,” exaggerated distortion vis-à-vis the concave mirror—, however explicit, are not absolutely followed by the playwright himself. After repeating Valle-Inclán’s three-part model for writing theater, Antonio Buero Vallejo deduces:

que una correcta definición del esperpento ha de abarcar esos matices y que no hay esperpentos absolutos. Tal vez sea cierto, pero la teoría del esperpento creada por el propio Valle-Inclán dice otra cosa. Dice, ya se sabe, que la visión desde ‘el

aire' es desdeñosa; que el autor [. . .] 'jamás' se emociona con sus personajes; que el esperpento debe ser 'una superación del dolor y de la risa.' [. . .] Los esperpentos de don Ramón son buenos—repitémoslo—porque no son absolutos. ("De rodillas" 44-45)

Buero Vallejo goes on to insist that Valle-Inclán stubbornly allows, to a certain degree, tragic elements (e.g., *hamartia*, *catharsis*, etc.) in his *esperpentos*, despite his best intentions to remain wholly faithful to his formula. The reality, argues Buero Vallejo, is that, "las máscaras caen a menudo y descubren rostros de hermanos nuestros que lloran" (44). A nebulous fluidity between the three aesthetic mediums (from below, at eye-level, or from above), regardless of Valle-Inclán's fervent devotion to the detached *esperpentic* style, allows for audience engagement, increased aesthetic sensitivity, and, from Buero's perspective, tragic catharsis.<sup>26</sup>

## VII. *Othello cornudo*

Valle divides his *esperpentos* into four specific plays: *Luces de Bohemia* (1920), *Los cuernos de don Friolera* (1921), *Las galas del difunto* (1926), and *La hija del capitán* (1927), with the latter three gathered in 1930 into a definitive collection titled *Martes de carnaval*. While Valle never limits the genre exclusively to theater—he at one point indicates that *Tirano Banderas* and *El ruedo ibérico* "[v]ienen a ser [. . .] dos novelas esperpentos acrecidos y trabajados con elementos que no podían darse en la forma dramática de *Luces de Bohemia* y de

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<sup>26</sup> Such an observation coincides with Buero's passion for tragedy, a form that he persistently associates with the *esperpentos*, despite Valle's insistence to the contrary. In 1972, Buero urges that si hay un porvenir para el arte dramático, lo que el movimiento participador del presente anuncia muy primordialmente no puede ser otra cosa, sino que la tragedia—con su riqueza de significaciones, su macerada elaboración de grandes textos, su apolínea mesura (que acaso podríamos llamar velazqueña), su dinámica exploración de formas, su renovada asunción de perfiles orgiásticos y esperpénticos—torna a ser una magna aventura preñada del futuro. (OC II 196)

*Los cuernos de don Friolera*”—, his esperpentic theories imply that they are best suited for dramatic adaptations (*Entrevistas* 395). In the following section, I will closely analyze the second recognized *esperpento*, *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, in order to demonstrate Valle’s earnest attempts to apply his distant and deforming aesthetic.

In *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, Valle-Inclán focuses his caustic gaze on Othello, Shakespeare’s duty-bound Moorish protagonist. By emphasizing the character’s misgivings, personified in don Friolera, the playwright simultaneously disparages early twentieth century Spanish culture, exposing its hypocritical obsession with a code of honor it no longer practices. As Valle’s culminating dramatic technique, the *esperpento* ultimately comes to represent the failure of his theatrical and literary venture; in setting out to renew the glory of Spanish *hidalguía*, he only encounters the reflection of impossibly flawed characters, distorted by Spanish society at the turn of the century.

Like unto Shakespeare’s Othello, don Friolera grows increasingly suspicious of his wife’s fidelity over the course of the play. His first line, read from a note tied to a rock, already insinuates his cuckolded status. It reads, “[t]u mujer piedra de escándalo” (OC II 998). The similarities between Othello and Friolera, however, end there. When don Friolera first accuses his wife, Loreta, of adultery (and consequently threatens to kill her—as dictated by the traditional code of Spanish honor), she begins actively pursuing a relationship with Pachequín, the *barbero marchoso*—a far cry from Desdemona’s constant faithfulness. Both don Friolera and Loreta become grotesque disfigurations of their tragic counterparts. John Lyon indicates that “[i]t is not until *Los cuernos* that Valle produced anything approaching ‘systematic distortion’ or the ‘matemática perfecta’ alluded to in *Luces*, in which the ‘deformación deja de serlo,’ when, in other words, the grotesque becomes the absolute, the norm” (*Theatre* 125). By invoking puppet-

like characters, Valle manages, according to Lyon, to make his esperpentic theories a practical reality. Similar to the reflection of a concave mirror, the marionettes provide a distorted view of society, suggesting to the audience that their agency, sharply conditioned by powerful and pervasive societal forces, is similarly constrained.

In *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, Valle employs three different depictive models (a format that Sumner M. Greenfield describes as an “estructura tríptica, como un tríptico teatral”) to portray Friolera’s story of cuckoldry and dishonor (*Anatomía* 254). The first rendition takes place during the prologue, when a puppeteer unfolds the short, farcical story of don Friolera, a recently inaugurated coronel, who suddenly receives word that his wife is cheating on him with “Pedro Mal-Casado.”

EL BULULÚ. Pues será usted un cabrón consentido.

EL FANTOCHE. Antes que eso le pico la nuez. ¿Quién mi honra escarnece?

BULULÚ. Pedro Mal-Casado.

FANTOCHE. ¿Qué pena merece?

BULULÚ. Morir degollado. (OC II 994)

Friolera, responding to the ancient Spanish tradition of honor and marital duty, mechanically accepts his responsibility to kill his cheating wife.

LA MOÑA. ¡Derramas mi sangre inocente, cruel enamorado! ¡No dicta sentencia el hombre prudente, por murmuraciones de un malvado!

EL FANTOCHE. ¡Muere, ingrata! ¡Guiña el ojo y estira la pata!

MOÑA. ¡Muerta estoy! ¡El Teniente me mata! (OC II 995)

This farcical interpretation of the central story of the play forms an excellent parallel with Valle’s “vision astral.” A puppeteer blindly pulling the strings of unsuspecting marionettes

guides them into an unenviable situation of distrust and violence. The overweening will of the puppeteer, allegorically similar to the “manipulat[ing] strings of collective social myths,” determines the actions of his puppets (Lyon *Theatre* 128). John Lyon continues, “Friolera cannot be said to ‘fall into the temptation’ of doing society’s will, since that would imply that he had a choice in the first place. Valle shows him striking the attitudes and speaking the lines dictated to him by traditional codes” (127). These codes, rampantly endorsed by Golden Age theater—especially in Calderón de la Barca—are so ingrained into Friolera that he feels he has no other decision but to kill his wife.<sup>27</sup>

The second expository technique pushes Valle’s theories of the *esperpento* into the foreground, casting puppet-like characters into an uncaring yet assiduously hidebound society. Whereas Othello elicits compassion because he stands “en pie” with Shakespeare, causing don Estrafalario, another character in Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento*, to describe them as “del mismo barro humano,” don Friolera can only sympathize with his marionette double, “ese Bululú, [que] ni un solo momento deja de considerarse superior por naturaleza, a los muñecos de su tabanque” (OC II 997). Loreta fares no better, as she, after arranging her final escape with Pachequín, must witness her daughter’s horrifying murder at the hands of her husband when he mistakenly attempts to avenge his honor.

DON FRIOLERA. ¡Vengaré mi honra! ¡Pelones! ¡Villa de cabrones! ¡Un militar no es un paisano! ¡Pim! ¡Pam! ¡Pum! ¡No me tiembla a mí el pulso! ¡Hecha justicia, me presento a mi coronel!

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<sup>27</sup> While multiple examples exist that showcase the *Siglo de Oro*’s obsession with a stringent code of honor, perhaps Calderón’s most well-known honor-bound play is his 1645 *El pintor de su deshonra*.

*Dispara el pistolón, y con un grito los fantoches luneros de la tapia se doblan sobre el otro huerto. Doña Loreta reaparece, los pelos en punta, los brazos levantados. (1047)*

The concluding scene, an interview with the coronel, in which don Friolera learns that he killed his daughter, not his wife, twists into bitter irony as his leader, despite don Friolera's certainty that he, like his *teniente*, is being cuckolded, questions don Friolera's sanity.

DON FRIOLERA. ¡Asesinos! ¡Cabrones! ¡Más cabrones que yo! ¡Maté a mi mujer! ¡Mate usted a la suya, mi Coronel! ¡Mátela usted, que también se le pega! ¡Pim! ¡Pam! ¡Pum! [. . .]

EL CORONEL. ¡Teniente Astete, ha perdido usted la cabeza! (1050)

As the story unfolds, *Los cuernos de don Friolera* assimilates the Shakespearean myth but, in a truly *esperpentic* way, also invokes a disturbing sense of irony amongst its viewers. It is not enough to attribute don Friolera's obsession with honor and his lieutenant's total denial of such a quality to the whims of fate or destiny. The figures represent, in much broader terms, the deficiencies of Spanish society at the turn of the century; their misgivings reflect back onto the public.

In the third and final depiction, a blind bard sings the ballad of don Friolera—a romantic version that changes the story's ending, concluding with the honorable Friolera who, after he erringly, “dispara ciego de ira / creyendo lavar la mancha / de su honor. ¡Ay, no sospecha / que la sangre derramaba / de su hija Manolita,” hunts down his wife and her eloping lover (OC II 1053). When he finds them, “[a] la mujer y al querido / los degüella con un hacha, / las cabezas ruedan juntas, / de los pelos las agarra, / y con ellas se presenta / al general de la plaza” (1054). The same audience from Ciego Fidel's puppet show, don Estrafalario and don Manolito,

observes after listening to the *romance* that “[é]ste es el contagio, el vil contagio, que baja de la literatura al pueblo” (1055). Specifically, the idealized myth, a distorted, inaccurate version of don Friolera’s story, comes under attack by the two spectators. “Indudablemente,” they satirically surmise, “en la literatura aparecemos como unos bárbaros sanguinarios” (1055). Since these two spectators accusatorily comment on tradition—i.e., the same system that forcefully causes Friolera to murder his wife due to an obsolete and obdurate code of honor—, they expect public scorn and ridicule.

### VIII. The Ashes of *El Fénix*

Valle-Inclán’s *esperpentos* respond to a nineteenth century situation similar to the setting that gave rise to the *tragicomedia* during Spain’s Golden Age. Since the traditional tragic model no longer appeals to the public at the opening of the seventeenth century, Lope de Vega chooses to combine tragic and comedic elements in order to produce a type of melodramatic theater that resonates with its audience. Unlike the diligently classical tragic model followed by Cervantes, Lope’s tragicomic technique allows him to achieve remarkable success. While public admiration adheres to the theatrical precedent set by Lope’s *tragicomedia* and continued by Echegaray’s melodrama some three centuries later, the rising generation of artists, thinkers, and philosophers—nominally identified as the *generación del ‘98*—refuse to follow popular opinion. In a way, they seek to extinguish the theatrical model put into practice by *El Fénix* by condemning his nineteenth century successor, José de Echegaray.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Although significant differences in themes, audience, and aesthetic codes separate the two dramatuges, modern critics and popular opinion during the nineteenth century confirm the connection between Lope and Echegaray. For more information on Echegaray’s incredible popularity, please consult Río-Font’s *Rewriting Melodrama*, particularly her third chapter, “Rewriting Melodrama: The School of Echegaray” (pp. 87-126).

If we can establish a melodramatic connection between Lope and Echegaray, it seems simple to form a parallel between Cervantes and Valle-Inclán, both of whom received a less than enthusiastic reception of their plays, employed farce and satire throughout their literary works, and, curiously, had maimed their left hands.<sup>29</sup> Such a comparison, however, belies the dramatic theories that Valle develops in response to Echegaray. Whereas Cervantes assiduously follows the classical tragic model in his theatrical productions, Valle main use of tragic conventions is to belittle its protagonists by casting them into incompatible dramatic settings. Such is the case for don Friolera, a distorted version of Shakespeare's Othello, who, so hell-bent on obeying an obsolete code of honor that requires he murder his allegedly cheating wife, mistakenly kills his own daughter. The second characteristic of Valle's *esperpentos* requires a complete emotional detachment from the characters of the play. As in the case of *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, John Lyon writes that "Valle removes any possibility of identification" (*Theatre* 128). By encouraging his characters to behave as marionettes, Valle disaffects the emotional appeal generated by classical tragedy (which ultimately leads to *catharsis*).<sup>30</sup> Lyon explains:

The automatism of the characters reflects an attitude to the world, a view of men as mindless puppets of collective myths and conventions. The code of honour is simply one example of the forces and abstract imperatives that shape human lives

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<sup>29</sup> While Cervantes lost the use of his hand during the siege of Lepanto, Valle acquired his injury far less glamorously. In July of 1899, Valle found himself heatedly engaged in a debate with Manuel Bueno over the legality of a duel to be held between Leal da Camara, a Portuguese caricaturist, and López del Castillo. Words came to blows and one of Valle's cufflinks became embedded in his wrist. Unfortunately, the playwright never seeks medical attention and gangrene sets in, forcing him to amputate his arm. Despite the loss of his arm, Valle never lost his sense of humor, once admitting that, "yo antes decía que valía mucho más que Cervantes. Acaso esto no era verdad... Pero de ahora en adelante no me negarán que, manco como estoy, por lo menos me le parezco bastante" (Madrid 59).

<sup>30</sup> As Aristotle explains in his classical definition of tragedy: "[t]ragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is of stature and complete, with magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, but with each of its kinds separate in its proper parts, is of people acting and not through report, and *accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing of experiences of this sort*" (18, emphasis mine). Aristotle clearly encourages sentimental attachment in tragedy, which helps the audience member to, through pity and fear, become emotionally cleansed.

and reduce them to the level of the *guignol*. [. . .] The spectator, while being emotionally detached, must nevertheless be made to feel that these *guignol* antics are the essential comedy of his own existence, contemplated from the totally dispassionate viewpoint of the dead. (*Theatre* 130-31)

Disfiguration and detachment are the hallmark characteristics of Valle's *esperpentos*.

Valle treats melodrama as Lope does tragedy. His invective towards Echegaray serves to illustrate his own passion for originality, regardless of popular perception. Lope, however, dismisses tragedy as a fruitless enterprise, preferring instead to combine it with comedy to produce his wildly successful *tragicomedia*. Lope's dramatic theory, unlike Valle's, places public opinion in a prestigious position and allows it to dictate his productivity as a playwright. Valle writes from a more personal position by addressing more pressing societal and cultural issues in his theatrical works. The irregularities revealed by his *esperpentos* should, as Lyon explains above, cause the viewers to reconsider the decadent and immoral state of their society. It comes as no surprise that Antonio Buero Vallejo finds redemptive potential in Valle's *esperpentos*. "En su teoría del esperpento," writes Buero, "los héroes clásicos vienen a pasearse por el callejón del Gato, pero son ellos quienes vienen y no sujetos cualesquiera. No se deforman en los cóncavos espejos para morir sino para alcanzar nueva vida" ("De rodillas" 50). Such a view coincides with Buero's natural altruism and undying hope for societal improvement. In Valle's case, Spain's glorious past has already come and gone. Its heroes, *hidalgos* from a bygone age, have devolved into inactive aristocrats. The nobility, a past sign of eminence and prestige, has grown corrupted and sterile. Valle harbors no hope for redemption; his destructive vision perceives a society where not even the tragic heroes of the past can survive. From *El Fénix*'s ashes rise Valle's *esperpentos*.

## Conclusion: Death, Decay, and Transformation

No sabemos nada de nada, no conocemos nuestras horas. Estamos perdidos en el terrible pecado del mundo. Los hombres llegan a las grandes situaciones y aparecen entonces en toda su pequeñez. Son como el ratón que corre dentro de la armadura. El guerrero murió y el ratón sigue el ‘Esperpento’; creo que es la manera de representar la España de nuestras horas.

- Valle-Inclán “Don Ramón del Valle Inclán.” (*Entrevistas* 287)

### I. The Rat in the Armor

As we have seen, Valle harbors a special memory for the bygone era of *hidalgos* and *mayorazgos*. It is from his own noble lineage that he, in 1915, “petition[s] the Ministerio de Gracias y Justicia in Madrid asking that the ancient titles, long vacant, be bestowed on his person so that he could be recognized as ‘Marqués del Valle, Vizconde de Viexín, y Señor de Caramiñal,’” only to have his request denied (*Lima Theatre* 9).<sup>1</sup> Valle felt a tremendous affection for the feudal aristocracy, selectively remembering their greatest accomplishments and, as Manuel Alberca and Cristóbal González signal, discounting any ignoble qualities and abuses on Spanish society. Valle’s political ideology “reivindicaba la vuelta al pasado como proyecto, resultaba, además de nostálgica, profundamente estética, pues aspiraba a reconstruir, en una maniobra antihistórica, algo que ya había existido, pero no tal como debió de existir, sino por fuerza de manera idealizada, eliminando los aspectos menos gratos de aquella realidad” (128). His determination to restore aristocratic privilege back to its selectively nostalgic, noble beginnings appears most prominently in *Las comedias bárbaras*. The feud between *hidalgo* father and ingrate sons in *Romance de lobos* underscores Valle’s deep passion for a culture that, for all intents and purposes, has disappeared from Spain by the opening of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberca and González provide a redaction of Valle’s request in their *Valle-Inclán. La fiebre del estilo* (pp. 272-73). In 1981, the king finally grants the honorary *marquesado de Bradomín* to Valle’s eldest son, Carlos Luis Baltasar del Valle-Inclán y Blanco.

The immoral state of Montenegro's sons in *Las comedias bárbaras* personifies a larger endemic societal problem facing the rising generation of aristocrats. Having been born into a comfortable lifestyle where they know nothing of economic or physical hardship, these "señoritos satisfechos," as Ortega y Gasset describes them, "[s]on el caparazón gigantesco de otra persona, de otro ser viviente. [. . .]Toda aristocracia hereditaria [se somete] a su irremediable degeneración" (*Rebelión* 147). As seen in *Las comedias bárbaras*, inherited nobility comes with its own separate series of challenges. If the emerging aristocrats are not careful to authenticate their existence—i.e., find a way to make their lives meaningful for their society at large—, they run the risk, as Montenegro's sons prove, of falling into barbarous lifestyles. "Un mundo sobrado de posibilidades," writes Ortega, "produce automáticamente graves deformaciones y viciosos tipos de existencia humana" (*Rebelión* 148). Such deformations are easily perceived in the actions of don Pedrito, Montenegro's second son, in *Águila del blasón*, the second play of *Las comedias bárbaras*.

Don Pedrito, during one of his lazy hunting excursions, stumbles upon Liberata, the beautiful wife of the local miller. Incensed with desire, don Pedrito explains to Liberata that the mill has a longstanding debt to the Montenegros that requires immediate reparation.

DON PEDRITO. Es preciso que me paguéis a mí la renta que mi padre no cobra,

y si no podéis pagarla, que dejéis el molino.

LIBERATA. ¿Viene con licencia del amo?

PEDRITO. Yo de nadie necesito licencia. . . O me pagáis a mí cien ferrados de

maíz, que toda la vida rentó el molino, o mañana mismo lo dejáis al casero

que antaño lo llevaba.

Anticipating Liberata's confusion, Pedrito offers relief to the miller's debt if she, like the neighboring tenant's daughters, agrees to sleep with him.

LIBERATA. ¡Cómo se conoce que tiene dos hijas mozas el señor Juan de Vermo!

PEDRITO. Para que se acuesten conmigo no se requiere que duerma debajo de la cama ningún cabrón.

LIBERATA. ¡Si lo dice por mí, sepa que tengo mucha honradez, y que sólo mi marido me calienta las piernas en la cama! ¡Más honradez que las hijas del de Vermo!

PEDRITO. Voy a meterte en el podrido bandullo un puñado de munición lobera.

Resistant to Pedrito's sexual advances and protective of her honor, Liberata flees, only to have him sick his dogs on her, biting, clawing, and tearing her flesh. Finally calling off his hounds, Pedrito, the malevolent son of Montenegro, rapes her.

*Hilos de roja sangre corren por las ágiles piernas, que palpitan entre los jirones. Bajo la vid centenaria revive el encanto de las epopeyas primitivas, que cantan la sangre, la violación y la fuerza. Liberata la Blanca suplica y llora. El primogénito siente con un numen profético el alma de los viejos versos que oyeron los héroes en las viejas lenguas, llegando a donde la molinera, le ciñe los brazos, la derriba y la posee. (OC II 367-368)*

According to Ortega's theory, such abuse of privilege coincides with an aristocracy that has lost its purpose. Valle is careful to point out the connection between Pedrito and the "epopeyas primitivas" and "viejos versos." His circumstances, however, are markedly different than the "heroes en las viejas lenguas." Instead of embarking on a Church-sponsored *Reconquista* à la Cid, Pedrito cruelly derides the sanctity of marriage by sexually assaulting the miller's wife. In

Spain, where feudalism has gradually come to a close, the *hidalgos* lose their place to a surging middle-class and burgeoning bourgeoisie.

Valle allegorizes social displacement and historical transformation as a suit of armor left to rust. The soldier who wears the armor—the proud feudal noble—has long died, only for a rat—in this case, Montenegro’s deplorable sons—to occupy his place. “Son como el ratón que corre dentro de la armadura,” Valle illustrates, “[e]l guerrero murió y el ratón sigue el ‘Esperpento’” (*Entrevistas* 287). Scampering about the armor’s interior, occupying the same space yet significantly unable to match the stature of their forbearers, the ‘rats’ find themselves inadequate for the task at hand. From Valle’s point of view, the only way to save Spanish society, a culture he systematically satirizes in his *esperpentos*, is to destroy it. “En el arte, como en la vida,” muses Valle in 1903, “destruir es crear” (OC II 1740). By exposing the flaws and exacerbating its deficiencies, Valle hopes to demolish his hopeless generation of ignoble nobility. Tearing classical literary heroes from their original contexts, he casts them onto the backdrop of an unforgiving, pitiless, esperpentic reality.

## II. Esperpentic Destruction

This dissertation has set out to prove that Valle’s *esperpentos* result from the accumulation of a recurrent, underlying theme of death and decay present throughout his *oeuvre*. From some of his earliest novels (e.g., the *Sonatas* (1902-1905), *Flor de santidad* (1905), and *La guerra carlista* (1908-1909)), poems (collected in *El pasajero* (1920)), and plays (such as *Las comedias bárbaras* (1906-1908, 1922)), Valle repeatedly reflects on the glories of the past and contrasts them with the failures of the present. Rife with political instability, religious hypocrisy, and theatrical banality, Valle’s *esperpentos* erect scenarios that double with his contemporary,

decadent society. Importantly, he forces tragic heroes (don Juan, the epitome of seduction; Othello, a symbol for marital fidelity and besmirched honor) onto the *esperpentic* stage, requiring them to come to terms with a society beyond the point of redemption. His purpose, as Max Estrella, the tormented artist in *Luces de Bohemia*, dictates, is to reveal a terrible cycle of depravity that consumes the Spanish people at the turn of the century. He states, “[I]a Leyenda Negra en estos días menguados es la Historia de España. Nuestra vida es un círculo dantesco. Rabia y vergüenza” (OC II 931). The noble past which Valle so fervently admires has somehow been locked out of the present, only to be replaced by religious and political corruption, artistic insensitivity, and swelling apathy for the plight of the poor.

The realization of his decadent environment, while visible in several characters and situations in his earlier works, does not become fully articulated as a systematic theory until 1920, when Valle begins writing his *esperpentos* in earnest. First, Valle proposes that the *esperpento* must view its characters “con la perspectiva de la otra ribera,” placing an insurmountable emotional distance between creator and creature that constitutes “una superación del dolor y de la risa” (OC II 993). Second, Valle requires that the characters themselves pass through the distorting effect of a concave mirror. As Max explains, “[l]os héroes clásicos reflejados en los espejos cóncavos dan el Esperpento” (OC II 933). Combining sentimental distancing with refracted disfigurement, the *esperpentos* represent the culmination of Valle’s total dissatisfaction with and destructive vision for Spanish life during the modern era. As explained in the first chapter, Valle harbors no sympathy for a culture he views as comprehensively inferior to that of his beloved *hidalgos*; his *esperpentos* strive to systematically dismantle “tragic evils, social cruelties, and incongruous behavior which distort mankind and in particular Spain” (Zahareas 599). These criticisms, unique from work to work—his central

critique in *Divinas palabras* focuses on religious hypocrisy whereas he heavily lambasts the dilapidated code of honor in *Los cuernos de don Friolera*—all point to larger, more endemic societal problems.

Witness to an atrophying aristocracy whose children flounder in perfidy and vice, a fractured government swinging from liberal to conservative according to the mood of the people, and a debilitated faith that does little to instill belief in its followers, Valle assiduously critiques the failures he perceives in his fallen nation, a Spain Max Estrella refers to as “una deformación grotesca de la civilización europea” (OC II 933). His *esperpentos* amount to a massively destructive effort to eradicate the hypocrisy and immorality of a decadent nation. This is not done wantonly. As Clara Luisa Barbeito argues, Valle has a redemptive purpose to his destructive technique: “[e]ste afán demoledor que se advierte en esta creación tiene por objeto limpiar el ambiente de falsos valores con fines de cimentar el futuro en bases más sólidas, aunque sean más modestas, con la esperanza de una España mejor” (Barbeito 212-13). Essentially, Barbeito detects a glimmer of hope in Valle’s *esperpentos*. He destroys only in order to rebuild.<sup>2</sup> According to Barbeito,

aparece una actitud de Valle que implica una observación que parece expresar que las civilizaciones no desaparecen totalmente, sino que ve en el devenir histórico como una especie de transformación dentro de la cual ciertos valores y elementos no se pierden enteramente. En otras palabras, una civilización está vigente mientras sus valores espirituales la animen, [. . .] lo alcanzado en el proceso se reintegra [. . .] a una civilización alumbrada por un nuevo sistema de valores por los cuales pueda regirse la humanidad” (Barbeito 213-14).

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of Valle’s societally destructive techniques, Francisco Ayala puts it more bluntly: “[l]a frase coloquial lo expresa de manera perfecta: [h]ay que matarlo, o dejarlo” (491).

A spiritual, abstract, subliminal form of cyclical continuity links one civilization to another. With Spain in a phase of comprehensive decadence, Valle uses his *esperpentos* to urge the cycle of death and decay toward life and renewal.

### III. Death and Decay

Most studies separate Valle's aesthetic development into two distinct fields: an earlier *modernista*-inflected style or his later destructively critical *esperpentos*. Such a facile view comfortably reduces the artist's development into binary categories, but does nothing to take into account his evolution as a writer and playwright. Barbeito observes that

Gran parte de la crítica va a seguir ahora este sendero para considerar a nuestro poeta desde la perspectiva de dos bien definidas etapas en su obra. Según esta tendencia, se produce en la creación valleinclanesca un viraje completo a partir de 1920, fecha de publicación de *Luces de Bohemia*, primera obra en la que se define la teoría de este nuevo género creado por Valle-Inclán. Se cree así que empieza en ese punto el interés del escritor por España. Sin embargo, este enfoque que muestra a Valle como un artista que ha cambiado de actitud en el objetivo de su creación literaria resulta poco convincente para el que estudie su obra con cuidado y la relacione a la época en que fue desarrollada. (Barbeito 9)

In other words, Valle's aesthetic development occurs over the course of his writings, not in two distinct, mutually exclusive phases. The tying thread, as this dissertation argues, consists of the themes of death and decay found throughout Valle's works; intermittently—yet meaningfully—present in his earlier novels and short stories, they become the driving force of his later *esperpentos*.

In order to detect the stylistic transmutations that appear throughout Valle's literary and theatrical works, this dissertation divides into four thematic sections: religious and political decay, aesthetic degeneration of the don Juan myth, societal transition and philosophical diagnosis, and theatrical theorization, specifically as applied to Valle's *esperpentos*. Each section addresses how Valle incorporates death and decay into broader thematic categories.

In the first chapter, I recognize how the death of the pilgrim, the Christ-figure found in *Flor de santidad*, reflects a society that no longer recognizes nor appreciates mystical signs and symbols. This coincides with a general critique that Valle levels against the Spanish populace at the turn of the century: anticlericalism and spiritual decay have caused the people to grow hardened at God's mysteries. The solution, as Valle perceives it, requires a believer to retrace his or her belief back its origins, incorporating basic Christian tenets into gnostic, esoteric forms of faith. Valle's *La lámpara maravillosa* provides insight into Valle's unique spirituality: a peculiar blend of Christianity and Gnosticism.

The second chapter considers one of Valle's first forays into applying a degenerative aesthetic to a mythical hero. Through the marqués de Bradomín, Valle depicts the gradual transformation of don Juan—from a youthful yet successful seducer into an elderly, mistake-prone libertine. Drawing from several past renditions of the don Juan myth, Valle recreates a decadent version of the seductive prototype. In the *Sonatas*, we are able to catch a foundational glance into the deforming aesthetic of a concave mirror that Valle systematically applies in his *esperpentos*.

The third chapter takes a philosophical approach to Valle's *Las comedias bárbaras* in order to underscore his critique of aristocratic decadence. The degeneration and ultimate failure of the Montenegro family strongly compares with Ortega y Gasset's own theories of aristocratic

atrophy and the revolt of the masses. Through don Juan Manuel de Montenegro, Valle illustrates the transformation that *hidalgos* need to make in order to survive the societal permutations of the late nineteenth century. Amidst a rising, empowered middle-class and a rapidly changing industrial landscape, the aristocracy must lead by example, much as Montenegro guides his processions of beggars to the doors of his former estate to demand justice, and seek ways to guide the lower classes as they adapt to a new economic and social stratum. If they fail to make these adjustments, the rising generation of nobility will atrophy, as do Montenegro's sons, to social irrelevance and cultural stagnancy.

The fourth and final chapter addresses Valle's *esperpentos* themselves, recognizing them as the culmination of an aesthetic technique developed throughout his earlier works. The themes of death and decay play prominent roles in the *esperpentos*. Valle's dramatic theory of distancing is often compared to the pitiless gaze of the dead:

DON ESTRAFALARIO. Mi estética es una superación del dolor y de la risa,  
como deben ser las conversaciones de los muertos, al contarse historias de los  
vivos. [. . .] Yo quisiera ver este mundo con la perspectiva de la otra ribera.  
(Valle-Inclán OC II 993)

His aesthetic deformation, already tested with a disfigured don Juan through the marqués de Bradomín, assumes systematic proportions when applied in his *esperpentos*. While he principally aims to distort classical heroes, he also satirizes traditional Spanish character and conventions.

Sumner M. Greenfield makes a list of potential targets for the *esperpento*:

las principales 'imágenes bellas' proyectadas en el espejo deformante son  
imágenes de España como una entidad nacional, la España 'oficial' e  
instituciones, tradiciones y extraños 'héroes' nacionales, como, por ejemplo, el

ejército—desde generales y tenientes hasta soldados de fila—, el pundonor y sus manifestaciones en la literatura del país—comedias del Siglo de Oro, romances de ciego y el melodrama decimonónico—, y Madrid, la capital, con su galaxia de tipos, desde golfos y burócratas hasta loteros y poetas. (“Reflejos” 314)

Valle’s deforming *esperpentos* pull no punches when criticizing contemporary society. Valle even recognizes decay at the dramatic level as he conflicts with José de Echegaray, whose conventional testimonial theater casually upholds the very moral hypocrisy Valle acutely condemns in his *esperpentos*.

From an early stage, death and decay appear as common tropes in Valle’s literary and dramatic works. Clearly dissatisfied with the decadent societal, moral, and intellectual environment of turn-of-the-century Spain, his criticisms recognize decay at multiple levels—religious, political, aesthetic, philosophical, and theatrical—, but do not develop into a single, coherent theory until he develops his *esperpentos*, which use death and decay as principal critical motifs in order to expose societal decadence and moral hypocrisy.

#### **IV. Valle’s Modern Relevance**

Antonio Buero Vallejo states in 1976 that “no sabemos cómo hacer Valle-Inclán en España” (OC II 1013). Indubitably acknowledging the long, difficult history of staging Valle’s plays in Spain—in 1966, the centennial year of Valle’s birth, José Luis Cano complains that “[o]nly one play of don Ramón’s has been staged [. . .], *Águila de blasón*,” which was received to dismal reviews—, Buero also recognizes that Valle’s final dramatic form, the *esperpento*, possesses an eternal critical quality since its “mirada lúcida se opone a la sistemática falsificación de la imagen del país que se realiza siempre a impulsos de los habitantes contra los

carentes” (1016). Despite its moment of its application, the *esperpento*’s critical theories—emotional distancing and systematic deformation—have a pertinent, constantly viable character for Spanish society.

In November of 2013, Ernesto Caballero, the director of Madrid’s *Centro Nacional Dramático*, brought a new interpretation of *Las comedias bárbaras* to the Spanish stage titled *Montenegro. Comedias bárbaras*. Featuring Ramón Barea as the titular protagonist—an impressive actor, director, and dramaturge in his own right—the play finished its run at the end of January, 2014. The successful three-month-long production, completed as recently as last year, underscores an observation Buero Vallejo makes in 1961 regarding Valle’s theater: “Valle-Inclán, autor marginal en su época, fue y es un gran autor dramático” (OC II 923). Some fifty years later, Buero’s words resonate powerfully with Caballero’s production. He considers Valle’s dramatic works “[m]ás actual y más teatral que en su momento mismo” (922).<sup>3</sup> Endemic financial and societal problems overwhelm Spain even in our postmodern era: a plummeting economy; a housing crisis; a younger, more technologically-savvy generation departing the country in order to find meaningful employment. The struggles facing today’s Spain, especially the financial troubles, parallel some of the same issues Valle systematically dismantles in his *esperpentos*.

Ernesto Caballero, upon directing his rendition of *Las comedias bárbaras*, identifies with Valle’s theme of societal decay and financial ruin, bridging the historical gap between the early twentieth century and modern Spain. In an interview with *El País*, he remarks, “[l]a analogía está ahí, aunque yo ni la buscaba ni hemos hecho un montaje en torno a eso. Sólo es que Valle-Inclán habla de un mundo bárbaro y nosotros también estamos sumidos en un proceso de

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<sup>3</sup> José F. Montesinos, in 1966, five years after Buero’s article, concurs, “[q]ueda mucho prodigiosamente vivo en la obra de Valle-Inclán, y a los realizadores teatrales y cinematográficos incumbe demostrarlo” (164).

descivilización, en nuestro caso heredado de un capitalismo salvaje que nos ha empujado a ser lobos y depredadores” (Fernández-Santos “Regreso”). While *Las comedias bárbaras* are not formally considered *esperpentos*, their thematic content, particularly their focus on aristocratic decadence and societal reconstruction, resonates soundly with a Spain mired in economic turmoil.

Valle’s esperpentic vision misshapes a decadent society into something thoroughly banal and deplorable. His deforming aesthetic strives to further distort an already distorted reality by portraying classical heroes that have undergone another level of disfiguration through the concave mirror. With so much deformation, it comes as no surprise that Ángel Loureiro feels that, “[r]educidos a un elemento más de la obra, los espejos del callejón del Gato ya no reflejan para nosotros ninguna realidad” (220). Rather, the very image that the concave mirror reflects is a stylistic decision by the dramaturge to exacerbate the flaws and frailties of a figure trapped in a society fraught with immorality and apathy. After all, as Max Estrella instructs, “[e]l sentido trágico de la vida española sólo puede darse con una estética sistemáticamente deformada” (OC II 933). Valle’s goal, as is Unamuno’s and many other writers, thinkers, and artists from Spain’s *Generación del ’98*, is to reveal the tragic sense of Spanish life. Through the themes of death and decay, models he fully articulates as the guiding aesthetic theory of his *esperpentos*, he urges societal and cultural transformation through the total deformation of the prevailing Spanish reality.

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